



6.

## THE SCHOOL

Andrew's forehead leaned against a pane of glass.

On the other side, nighttime scenery rushed by: houses and lawns and cars, all fake somehow in the eternal twilight, more like cardboard cutouts than actual items. Manner's 'imperfect' universe. He could understand now why he'd had that feeling of vague wrongness when he first awoke here. If you accepted it at face value, it might fool you, but when you stepped back and tried to take it all in at once, it all looked rickety, like you could poke holes right through it with your finger.

He looked away from it all before the dizzy panic in his chest could spread.

He'd passed out sometime after being carried onto this bus, but now he could examine it at his leisure. It was a long, metal tube. Brown, imitation leather-covered seats marched away from him in rows, some of them with pen-scrawled graffiti. Several were occupied, the backs of scruffy heads the only thing visible to Andrew as they faced the driver. The per-

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son at the wheel was obscured by a padded wall and the overhanging mirror was too cracked and shattered for a reflection. A sign right next to the driver's seat had a picture of a menacing, shadowed figure holding out a fistful of candy to some cartoon children that looked eager to take it.

Below this, the caption read, "Always talk to *Strangers*."

In the seat directly across the narrow aisle from him was the gaunt, shirtless, almost skeletal figure that had knocked him on his ass outside the house where Manners hid them. He was a complete contrast to the hulk Andrew just fought, but he had those same burning eyes. They were bright enough to light up a muted halo around his face.

He turned them on Andrew. No pupils in there, nothing but a shifting sheen of blood red and burnt orange, like staring into a volcano. The man displayed chipped teeth in a grin. Part of his lip on the bottom was blackened and rotted away down to the gumline. "Wakey, wakey, little sin cow."

Andrew said nothing.

"Too bad." He gave a forlorn shake of his head. "I would have enjoyed removing parts of your body until you regained consciousness."

"Where's Ronnie?"

"You mean the other mortal? He has eluded us, for now. But it matters not."

"Who are you people? *What* are you?"

"You really wish to know?"

Andrew nodded.

"Very well. We are the--" A tangle of syllables spilled out of his mouth that caused something right in the center of Andrew's forehead to seize up, like the painful spike of a cold headache. At first he thought it was his multiple head injuries finally catching up to him, an aneurysm or blood clot popping to kill him, but then he realized his new friend was grinning even wider as he waited for the echo of his words to fade away.

"Did you get that? Should I repeat it?"

"Please." Andrew coughed miserably. Coppery blood filled his mouth. "Please, don't."

The other man—if this thing *was* a man—laughed. It was a gruff sound. "We wouldn't want to damage you. Not yet. Since before time be-

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gan, your kind has called us Incarnates. I see no reason why that will not suit our purposes now.”

The name rang the dullest of bells for Andrew. Manners. Manners had mentioned these things. He’d been afraid they were going to find him.

“What do you want from me?”

“We are the emissaries. The hands, eyes, and mouth of Trofonag the Depraved, the Outer Terror, He who, in turn, serves the whim and will of the Stranger.”

Trofonag. That word dove into his mind—he imagined it in there thumping through the ridges of his brain like a prospector panning for gold—and what it unearthed was a painful memory: the time he’d blackmailed another student in the second grade, threatening to tell that the boy had been the one to break the drinking fountain if he didn’t give up half his lunch money for the week. Christ, he hadn’t thought about that in nearly thirty years. “I...I don’t understand.”

“Of course you don’t. But your understanding is inconsequential. The Dark Filament brought us, its armies are massed, and after we breach the thin wall that separates us, your world will be but a footnote in our conquest.”

“Outside the lines,” Andrew stated, almost robotically. “You want to break through. To get from this universe...to mine.”

The Incarnate’s eyes narrowed, those blast furnaces slitting. “How do you know that? Who have you spoken with? Who crafted the magics that hid you and the other human during our search?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” he said, too quickly. “What do you want with my world? What’s going to happen if you get through?”

“Chaos, death, and darkness. A return to the old ways, when your kind was sludge on our boot heels. And do you know how we will start, sin cow? Do you know the first thing we will do when we enter your reality?” He leaned across the aisle as though telling a secret, that rotted smile combining with his glowing eyes to make a skin-covered jack-o-lantern. He held up a picture of Joey, taken from Andrew’s own wallet. “We will spill the guts of every...single...child your world has to offer.”

The anger swept out of nowhere, burning through every cell in An-

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drew's body, coating his thoughts in red haze. He screamed wordlessly, pure rage expressed in sound, and surged out of his seat to pound at this hideous creature.

His attack was fruitless. The Incarnate grabbed him by the throat and forced him back into his seat with more strength than a normal person his size could possibly have. His air supply vanished, and Andrew had no choice but to go slack until he was released.

As he fought for breath, the Incarnate stood over him without a shred of sympathy. His ribs poked at his pale skin, forming a ladder up to his scrawny neck. "And the best part is," he continued, "*You're* going to make it happen."

There was a squeal as the bus brakes engaged, and a lurch when it stopped. Andrew was still recovering from his throttling when two of the Incarnates yanked him up by the arms and carried him from the vehicle so roughly he couldn't get his feet under him. One of their hands was nothing but a skeleton with a few scraps of muscle clinging to it.

The bus sat in front of a school. Arthur J. Filament Elementary, according to the sign out front. The name was circumspect, but, if he had the right understanding of this place now, then the school itself actually existed back in the real world. Just another perk for the residents of Strangewood. The building was two-stories, lots of windows, a flagpole with the American flag in front. It only had one star on it, but still. The place should've been cheerful and inviting for the kids—most of them around Joey's age—that attended class here everyday, but the pollution of this world made it more terrifying than any haunted house or dreary forest. The brick exterior was infected with the same darkness that had taken over the sky.

Andrew didn't want to go in there. His stomach clenched at the thought, his testicles drawing up.

But his captors weren't asking permission. The one that had choked him led the way as they carried him up the paved walkway and in through the front doors as he squirmed. Inside, the hallways were dark and silent on the surface, but buzzed with an undercurrent of energy that he imagined he could only feel in his bones. There was potential here, expectation, and when they passed over the threshold he drew in a sharp breath

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as though he'd just put his hand in fire.

But that was okay, he decided. As long as there were no glowing handprints or impish voices that spoke madness, he could bare it.

They took him deep into the building's interior, into a maze of lockers and closed classroom doors. His head throbbed, pulsing in sync with that latent power bleeding from the walls. He slipped in and out of consciousness, and only one moment in the journey stood out enough for him to recall.

They approached a door on the left that said, "FURNACE."

It was black. Blacker than night, blacker than outer space, blacker than any color ever conceived by man. It gulped at the little bit of light in the hall, sucking it in, forming an aura of darkness that bulged in front of it.

And here those licks of energy peaked into a jangled disharmony that set his hair on end.

"Nooo," he moaned, and then screamed, "Please, no, *dontakemeinthere!*"

The two Incarnates holding him were as distressed as he was. They quivered and halted, unwilling to go past. The one leading waltzed by, then turned and spat, "Keep moving you wastes of flesh, or what's behind that door will be a paradise compared to what I do to you!"

They crossed to the far side of the hallway and moved on.

Finally, when Andrew's arms ached and he was sure this would never end, they turned into an open door and dropped him on the threshold.

It was a classroom with multiple desks. There were more electric lanterns around the entrance, on the teacher's desk and several of the students', casting steep shadows from their sphere of weak radiance. The Incarnates shielded their eyes from the light.

In the middle of the room a figure stood with its back to him, speaking to a group of six or seven more Incarnates. The figure was giving orders. It pointed angrily and the mass disbanded, filing out of another door on the far end of the room.

"Facilitator!" Andrew's tormentor from the bus barked. "Here is one of the mortals! Let us begin!"

The figure turned and crossed the linoleum, entering the circle of light cast by the lanterns. Andrew looked up at the face above him.

"Well," Edward Manners said. "You certainly gave us quite a chase, sir."

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Ronnie wasn't sure how long he napped beneath the bus, but he came aware when it stopped. The Percocet had worn off enough for him to not feel woozy, but his nose and ear once more throbbed in tune with his heartbeat, and now his ankle was joining the chorus where Marglo bit him. He waited until he was sure the passengers had all filed off before lowering himself to the pavement, and then crawled cautiously out.

He was alone. The bus was parked at the curb of an elementary school from hell. That wasn't exaggeration; he'd seen less ominous buildings in Freddy Krueger movies. So of course, with his current streak of luck, he had no doubt this was where the Nuclear Brethren had taken Officer Andrew.

Any direction he went from here would expose him. The closest cover was a low brick wall that started at the edge of the school lawn about ten yards away and then led up past the left side of the school. He hesitated, still not sure if he wanted to risk his neck any further for the cop, but the point was moot. He'd come too far to turn back now.

He crawled across the lawn on his belly, thinking about when he and Mark used to play 'army men' in the backyard as kids, and then shying away from that memory just as fast. His ankle radiated waves of heat up his entire leg, but he didn't stop to check it until he'd covered the sixty or so yards to the building.

The anklet of wounds just above the shredded top of his sock was angry red and swollen. Perfect. Who knew what diseases were in that thing's saliva?

"Now what, Ronnie-o?" he muttered. "What's the brilliant plan?"

He was flying by the seat of his pants, and that was what had gotten him in this mess in the first place. He needed to think. Well, step one was get into the building. No, scratch that. Step one, above all else, was to not get himself caught. Step *two* was get into the building.

Ronnie crept along the exterior. All of the doors he found were locked. Near the rear, he found a maintenance ladder bolted to the brick, high up so it would be out reach of young hands. He had no trouble leap-

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ing to grab the last rung, hauling himself up, and then climbing to the black-tarred roof of the school.

An access door next to an HVAC unit was unlocked. He slipped inside and sealed it back. Utter darkness greeted him in the stairwell down to the second floor. He waited for his eyes to adjust, but they never did. He finally limped down a stair at a time, until he came out into a main hallway almost as pitch.

A full body shiver worked its way through him. This place was not right, in a cosmic, back-of-the-eyeballs sort of way. He was never a big fan of the educational institution, but the walls here felt alive and watching. They buzzed beneath his fingertips, like the vibration of distant machinery. He moved on, listening for voices, but the school's silence was so thick it was claustrophobic.

By the dim evening light coming through windows at either end, he found a door labeled 'CUSTODIAL.' After tripping over a mop bucket and almost severing his pinky on a disassembled paper shredder, he found a working flashlight whose bulb wattage was high enough to be used as a prison guard tower search beam.

There was also a fire axe in a wall-mounted glass box. He thought of the hatchet he'd used to kill Marglo and mentally gagged. As little as he wanted to perform any more wet works, he needed a weapon. He unsealed the case and hefted the weapon in one hand.

Then it was back out into the hallway, the flashlight kept off and shoved in his waistband. Now he only had to check every room in the school until he found Andrew. He turned the corner into the next dark crosshall...

And almost ran into the broad, rotting back of one of the Nuclear Brethren.

The guy spun at the sound of either Ronnie's approach or his mad scramble to back away. Those deep red orbs drilled into him, scattering shards of light in all direction like a prism. The man wore an NHL hockey jersey for the New York Americans, which, if Ronnie remembered his favorite sport worth a damn, had disbanded sometime in the early forties.

"Little mortal came to us," Jersey growled. He gaped in surprise for only a moment before recovering his wits. "How convenient."

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Ronnie brandished the axe. “Let’s see how convenient it is when I chop you into firewood, asshole! Now where’s Andrew?”

Jersey came at him with spooky silence. Ronnie swung the axe blind. The blade thunked into the other man’s upper chest, releasing a dribble of brackish, partially-coagulated blood. He grinned and wrenched the handle out of Ronnie’s grasp, then pulled the weapon from the wound with a wet, sucking *shbbhluck!*

“We have the other human. I don’t think Almighty Trofonag will be too angered if I turn your body into a flesh sculpture in honor of his greatness.”

The only other thing he had that was even close to a weapon was the heavy-duty flashlight. Ronnie pulled it out just in time for the creature to knock it away, then plant a hand on his chest and shove. He flew back against the corridor wall, hitting hard enough to knock the wind out of him, and then rebounded into the floor. Jersey moved in, axe raised.

When the flashlight hit the tile floor, it switched on, throwing a shaft of pure white radiance back at them. Jersey screamed, dropped the axe and threw up a hand to cover his eyes. The reaction was so violent it could’ve been acid thrown in his face.

Ronnie scrambled for the flashlight as it rolled away down the hall. Jersey shook off the blow and came after him. Ronnie got in one good kick at the creature’s chest—a few ribs snapped like kindling—and then it landed on him.

Luckily, he already had the flashlight by then.

He shone the beam right in the thing’s face. Jersey cursed and flailed away. He followed with the beam, chasing him into the corner of the nearest locker, where he buried his head in his hands. Ronnie kept him pinned there, blind and writhing, while he retrieved the axe.

“All right, let’s try this again, dickhead.”

A few minutes later and Jersey was a bloody mess on the floor. The fire in his eyes extinguished, and Ronnie thought he saw black smoke wafting from the empty sockets in its skull just before he turned away.

He suddenly had a much better idea for how to go about this.

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Andrew stared up into Manners face for a full twenty seconds. The professor gave no indication he even recognized him as he looked down his nose.

“Where was he?” Manners asked the Incarnate from the bus. The other two still stood on either side of Andrew, ready to grab him if he made a move.

The creature lowered his hand, but still squinted in the pale lamplight. “Covering in a basement like the vermin he is.”

“And the other one?”

“He...escaped. My men are searching the area for him even now.”

Manners glanced once more at Andrew. He couldn't figure out what was going on, and his exhausted brain was throwing suggestions at him half-heartedly, that this man had been duping them all along, or that this wasn't even the same person. Anything was possible in this insanity; hadn't that been proven time and time again? He opened his mouth to just ask for an explanation—it probably couldn't make things worse than they already were—but Manners rushed to cut him off.

“Good. Take this one somewhere and guard him until you've found the other.”

“No. We'll continue the search, but we don't *need* the other. Begin the ritual with this one immediately.”

“We should wait.”

“*We've waited long enough!*” the Incarnate snarled. “Open the doorway so we can feast on their world!”

Manners turned a stern gaze on the creature, a look that could probably freeze any poor undergrad student in their tracks. “Who is the Facilitator, demon, you or I?”

“You are, but don't forget your place. You hold no dominion over us. Your part in this is all but finished. Open the doorway or I'll do it for you.”

Manners glared for another few seconds before relenting. “Fine. Let me collect my things and we will go downstairs.” He turned away from

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Andrew and started across the room to a satchel on the windowsill.

“There is...one more thing,” the Incarnate said, a sly touch to his words, and Manners froze with his back turned. “These cows had help.”

“Help? What do you mean?”

“Powerful artcrafts protected them; magics far stronger than they would ever be capable of. That’s why they eluded us for so long.”

Manners froze with his hand on the strap of the leather bag. “What are you suggesting?” he asked over his shoulder.

The Incarnate crossed the room, coming up close enough behind him to speak directly into the professor’s ear. Andrew leaned forward to listen to what was whispered, but there was no need; the creature spoke at the same barking level.

“I’m *suggesting* that there’s a rogue force at play in this reality you constructed,” he said, “because if I thought for even a second your leash had grown long enough to allow such duplicity, I would tear your puling guts out.”

The moment stretched, and just as Andrew thought he was beginning to grasp the situation, a new sound filled the room: a brief, high-pitched whine, followed by a rustling.

Everyone in the room raised their heads and stared around in confusion, but Andrew recognized the noise.

The open hum of a PA system.

“Attention faculty and students,” a familiar voice boomed over them. Andrew grinned. “This is Principal Pearson.”

“*The other human is here!*” the Incarnate screeched. He pointed at the two guarding Andrew. “*He’s in the headmaster quarters! Go now! Gather the others! FIND HIM!*” They tromped out of the classroom.

“Officer Andrew, if you can hear this,” Ronnie continued over the loudspeaker, “would you please meet me in the place where your son would do that thing he likes to do? And just in case you need some assistance...”

The room blazed as the overhead fluorescents came on, both here and the hallway outside, unnaturally bright after so long in the dark. The kid must’ve used the master override; since Columbine, all schools had them in case the police needed to search the premises fast. The bony In-

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Incarnate screamed and clutched at his face, stumbling backward into the first row of desks like a man trying to get away from a swarm of bees.

Andrew didn't waste the opportunity. He swayed on his jelly legs as he got up. The creature thrashed, throwing wild punches while hiding his eyes in the crook of his other elbow. That anger from the bus came back. Andrew dove into him, throwing them both over a desktop and into the floor. They fell in a pile with Andrew on top, and he straddled the hideous thing, pulling its arm away so he could pound that rotten face with both fists. He could feel bones snapping beneath its mushy skin.

"Stop!" Manners pleaded. "You'll kill him!"

Andrew got in a hit that made his knuckles ache. "I hope I do!"

"Yes, but you don't want to be that close to him when he dies, believe me! Run, while you have the chance!"

Andrew reached into the pocket of the creature's faded jeans and pulled Joey's picture out. The Incarnate coughed and twitched, reaching weakly for him as he got up. Andrew kicked him in the head. The left side of its putrid face collapsed beneath the toe of his sneaker. "Let's go, you're coming with me!"

"What? I-I can't, I have to stay!"

Andrew grabbed the professor around the back of the neck and shoved him toward the door of the classroom. "I don't remember giving you a choice!"

"You have no idea what you're doing!"

"No kidding. That's been par for the course since the beginning of this whole mess."

In the hall, Andrew saw that all the lights in the entire school were on. It made the place much less terrifying. Several yards away, the other two Incarnates writhed on the ground.

"Do you know this school?" Andrew asked.

"I built this entire universe from the ground up. I assure you, I know every inch of it."

"Good. Then take me to the art classrooms."

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The art room Ronnie waited in was rectangular, with long windows and cabinets of art supplies along one side, and children's pictures covering the other in a collage of the damned. They were full of the glopped-on paint and primitive characters indicative of any kindergartener, but the kids that created these needed serious help. Beasts of all shapes and sizes were depicted as they tore human beings apart by the handful. Red and black seemed to be the predominant colors. He resolved to wait only another minute before he declared that he'd done the best he could and make a run for it, but Andrew came running in before he counted to thirty, shoving the good Professor ahead of him.

"Holy shit, it worked?"

"Yeah, thanks. That was some damn good thinking, but I'm sure those things will find a way to come after us any minute." Andrew forced Manners into the closest desk with a hand on his shoulder.

"How'd *he* get here?"

"He was already here, giving out orders to these things." Andrew's eye was caught by the collection of nightmare-inducing art. He scanned across them as he continued talking. "He's their 'Facilitator,' whatever that means."

"Oh, you old douchebag *fuck*," Ronnie spat. "I knew you were in on this, I just *knew* it."

"I told you to stay put!" Manner snapped. "All you had to do was sit there and wait for me, and you incompetents couldn't do that correctly!"

"Yeah, well I got news for you, genius! Your spell or whatever didn't work! It led them right to us!"

"It...it did? Oh, I didn't compensate for..." His reserved face twitched with emotion warring beneath the surface. "I apologize, I don't normally perform that kind of work. In any case, you have to let me go back! They can't know I tried to help you!"

"Not this time." Andrew crossed his arms. "We want answers. Right now."

"Uh, right *now*?" Ronnie went to the doorway of the classroom and

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glanced up and down the bright hallway. “Andrew, don’t you think we oughta be, uh, hittin the ol dusty trail?”

“I’m not moving another inch until I understand what’s going on.” He leaned over Manners. “Tell us everything. What this place is, how it got here, what those Incarnates want with us...everything.”

“And about this Trofo—!”

“*SHHHHHH!*” Manners pushed past Andrew and leapt up from his desk chair, wagging a finger at Ronnie. Absolute panic filled his face. “Do *NOT* say that name! He will know, he will hear it, and then whatever time you might have bought yourselves will be wasted!”

Ronnie blinked. Even just the two syllables he’d gotten out were enough to make him dizzy, and sent the time when he’d stolen fifty dollars of his mom’s grocery money shooting to the surface of his consciousness. Saying the word was even worse than seeing it or hearing it.

“Explain,” Andrew bade the old man softly. “And if you convince me fast enough, we might let you go.”

Manners threw up a hand and paced away from them. “Believe me when I say, there are forces at work here so grand you couldn’t imagine them. It would be like trying to explain quantum physics to a golden retriever.”

“These things want our universe. That son of a bitch said he wanted to kill my son. That’s not too hard for me to understand.”

“*Start talkin!*” Ronnie shouted.

“All right!” Manners thundered, and launched into his scholarly teaching voice. “The theory of multiple parallel dimensions should be familiar to you. There is an infinite chain of universes just like yours, each with its own alternate earth and alternate timeline, many of them containing their own versions of Mr. Horner and Mr. Pearson, although they are, most likely, radically different from either of you. So it has been, since the beginning of whatever concept of time you subscribe to.”

Ronnie found himself nodding along. Other versions. Maybe a version where he’d made something of himself. Or one where his father hadn’t been such a dick.

Or one where Mark was still alive.

The idea actually gave him some comfort.

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Manners was still talking. “But now...they’re being plundered. Extinguished like candle flames. As I said earlier, your world is safe for now, but it may not be for much longer. This place is what’s known as a ‘staging dock,’ a preparation for...well, an invasion, to put things bluntly, which is all we really have time for. Going back to my cancer example, just as the cells within that growth want nothing more than to spread and infect the rest of the body, the forces contained within this small growth clinging to your plane of existence intend to breach the boundary separating them and claim your world as their own. As they have done countless times before.”

“*Who?*” Andrew pressed. “*Who* has done it countless times before?”

Manner’s next answer was longer in coming, and he swallowed several times before saying it. “Evil. The purest, most distilled form of the concept you could ever want. He goes by many names. The Dowser Beast. The Great Obligath. The Dark Stranger.”

“I’ve seen that written all over the place here. That Incarnate mentioned it.”

“I imagine so. This dock is built to His specifications, in His image. You are not dealing with Him directly, but your dimension will be claimed in His unholy name. If they succeed, it will be written across the sky in fire.”

“Then who are we dealing with?”

“The taking of your world was delegated to one of His generals, the name which you so carelessly almost blurted out, Mr. Pearson. And trust me, that creature is almost as bad.”

“You’re the one that makes all this possible,” Andrew said suddenly. His face reminded Ronnie of this borderline retarded kid that had been in his high school chemistry class, the day he finally understood what a milliliter was. “You’re the Facilitator. You said you built this place.”

Now Manners looked downright miserable for the first time, and as ancient and exhausted as a desiccated Egyptian mummy. “I was a man once, long ago, on another world much like yours. I learned something terrible, dug too deep behind the fabric of things, and I was taken forcibly into His service, along with several of my colleagues. We were given more knowledge and life than any being should ever have. He needs men like

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me, you see. Men who...who understand the codes, can see the...ways. We open these staging docks, to prepare the way for His conquest.”

Before Ronnie was even aware of what was happening, Andrew grabbed the professor by his jacket lapels and drove him across the room, smashing him against that wall full of hideous drawings.

“*And you just do it?*” he shouted. “*You help them take over entire worlds?*”

“Please understand, I have no choice--!”

“Yes, you do, you *always* have a choice! How many people—how many children?—have died because of you? In my book, that makes you no better than this Stranger!”

Manners looked haunted by the accusation. He remained pinned in Andrew’s grip as he said, “I’ve sat by so many times and watched as world after world after universe after universe fell to the armies of the Dark Filament, and this time, this *one* time, I saw an opportunity to stop it.”

“Look, I don’t care about your life story,” Andrew growled. “Just tell us how we fit into this whole mess, and how we can stop it.”

Before Manners could speak, the lights went out. Or rather *exploded* out, hard enough to pierce the plastic coverings over them and spray fluorescent bulb glass in all directions. As they plunged back into darkness, Ronnie felt a thousand tiny daggers slash at him, and covered his face.

“Andrew,” he said. “I think we better save that one for another time.”

Andrew released Manners, grabbed him by the back of the neck instead, and slung him toward the door. “C’mon, let’s go.”

“No, you said you would let me go back!”

“I said if you convinced me, and the only thing you’ve convinced me of is that you have to be kept out of their hands.”

They entered the hallway, now in total darkness. For the first time, Andrew realized Ronnie had an axe. He held the shaft in both hands out in front of him.

“But, b-but--!” Manners sputtered.

“Shut up, Professor, or so help me, I’m going to pull your tongue out.”

“*C’mon!*” Ronnie hissed.

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He led the way down several corridors by the light of a cannon-sized flashlight, limping badly. Andrew didn't even try and navigate mentally or count how many turns they made, he just concentrated on keeping his hand clamped on Manner's wrist, dragging him along.

At last the younger man stopped and glanced around one more corner. "There's a fire exit way at the end of the next hallway," he whispered. "Don't know what we'll do after that, but at least it'll get us outta the building."

"That's all I can ask for right now," Andrew said, thinking about that power in the walls, emanating from that door labeled FURNACE.

The three of them eased into the next hallway. Andrew could see the doors at the end, visible only as a slightly less dark rectangle. They looked a football field's length away.

From behind them, came the clang of a door, and the scurrying of feet.

All of them stopped and looked back.

"Oh God," Manners moaned. "They released the Elohaman."

Coming down the corridor after them was an unending pack of children. Ages anywhere between four and seven, all hairless, all naked and sexless, all so pale and white they glowed in the dim light. They spilled out of a doorway just up the hall and came at them with uncanny speed, filling the passage from side to side, some of them on all fours, some almost floating, some defying gravity outright and scurrying up the walls. Claws stretched from their delicate fingers and fangs lined their smiling mouths. None of them made a single sound, but he heard their laughter in his head all the same.

These were the creatures that sang to him on the phone. The ones that tried to distract him in the living room where he'd fought that first Incarnate with their handprints. The ones that had painted those terrible images in the art room.

A terror as he had never known bashed its way into Andrew's brain, leaving him a quivering shell.

"RUN!" Manners bellowed. Now it was him tugging at Andrew as he sprinted away from the ghastly monsters. Andrew felt his feet start to move, but it was like someone else behind the controls.

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They passed Ronnie, who was sweeping his flashlight beam along the faces of their tiny pursuers.

“That won’t work! They’re not Incarnates, they’re Elohaman!” Manners called over his shoulder. The pronunciation of the word sounded like something from the Torah. “Nothing more than vampires! We have to get outside!”

Andrew pulled his hand out of Manner’s and pumped his legs. He couldn’t be caught by those things, he couldn’t bare to be touched by them, because he *knew*, he knew there would be one in that pack of innocent-looking demons that looked just like Joey and if that happened, his mind would break.

The length of hallway to the doors had tripled. He and Manners were just about dead even with Ronnie a few steps behind, and the sound of their pursuers was like a muted thunder.

He put his arms out and hit the metal of the fire door with his palms, shoving it open, and ran into the unnatural night. Manners did the same with the other door.

Ronnie screamed.

Andrew turned in time to see him go down, one of the white creatures clinging to his hurt leg.

The axe flew out of his grip and hit one of the doors as it started to swing back closed. Andrew leapt forward and grabbed it. The creature that tripped Ronnie was towing him back down the corridor, and Andrew swung the blade of the axe into its skull. The entire top half of its bald head tore away. It fell back, caterwauling.

“SHIT, GET ‘EM OFF ME!”

The others had reached them. Tiny hands latched around Ronnie’s feet and ankles. Andrew dropped the axe and snatched up his arms, trying to yank the kid out of their grasp and through the double doors. The tug-of-war lifted Ronnie completely off the ground.

Something scabbled at Andrew’s waist. He looked down to find one of the monsters had slunk underneath Ronnie to grab at him. He pulled his stomach away, over the threshold of the door, and when the thing tried to follow him, smoke poured from its pale skin. It screeched and jerked the appendage away.

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“They can’t enter nature, not even one as false as this!” Manners yelled.

“Professor, get over here and help me!”

Manners grabbed one of Ronnie’s arms and helped Andrew pull, but they were swarmed. There must be twenty of the impish creatures hauling at the kid, and more crowding around the doorframe to swipe at them.

And then one of them jumped atop Ronnie’s back and thrust its face almost into Andrew’s.

It was Joey. Just as he predicted. Joey with no hair, a little albino chemo patient, Joey with more malicious glee in his face than Andrew had ever seen, but unmistakably Joey. It hissed at him through incisors as long and narrow as toothpicks.

Andrew screamed and pushed away, letting go of Ronnie, falling back on his ass outside the doors of the school. Without his strength, the kid was yanked from Manner’s hands.

“ANDREEEEEEEW!”

He watched as Ronnie was dragged down the hallway, carried on a pale tide of small bodies, receding into darkness. His face was the last thing to disappear, mouth stretched open and still screaming Andrew’s name.

The doors of Arthur J. Filament Elementary School swung closed.

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