

AWAKE

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ISBN 978-1-339-01994-9

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

24 25 26 27 28

Printed in the U.S.A.

40

First printing 2024

Book design by Maithili Joshi



RUDE AWAKENING

This time, he knows.

The kitchen smells incredible, a cozy cloud of garlic and onions and ground beef. Everyone's in a good mood for the first time in weeks. Mom looks a little less tired as she pours spaghetti and boiling water into the colander in a column of steam. Dad tosses the salad, singing what he calls "the pasta song."

Aly's there, too, at the table. Smiling, for the first time in forever. Her hair's out of her face as she laughs and shakes her head at their dad. His heart feels full

and warm, and all the stirring in his mind quiets down for a bit.

Only . . . as Mom passes out bowls of pasta heaped with Bolognese sauce, he can already feel the warmth and sweetness fading.

His eyes fly to the smoke detector overhead.

His mind lights up. Something hot, nearby. Someone with a bad cloud around them, a burning mind full of bitterness and determination and smoke.

Oh no, not again, he thinks. Please never again, someone please help, oh no oh no oh no

“Wait,” he says, his lips numb, reciting the same single word he’d said the night everything went wrong.

Mom pauses, about to sit down. Dad stops, a spoonful of Parmesan cheese hovering over his bowl. Aly’s smile, her rare, wonderful smile, slowly drops into a frown.

“Simon,” she says, “what is it?”

The smoke detector blares. Mom looks at the stove. Dad stands, his chair pulling out on its own. He sniffs the air. Simon gets up and runs, following the sensation in his head.

The front door is on fire. Orange and yellow light flows up from the crack at its bottom and engulfs it.

The door falls forward like the drawbridge of a castle. Lands with a boom. A cloud of fire flows in after it, swirling through the air.

And there she is, in the middle of it all.

Smiling.

Happy.

And she says—

“Come on, Theland!”

WHAP!

Simon snorted, jerked up, sat back in his chair. Mr. Roth, lanky and smirking, stared down at him from over his reading glasses, rapping the edge of Simon’s desk with a copy of *Johnny Tremain*.

“I didn’t realize one of the greatest works of American literature was boring enough to put you to sleep,” he said.

Simon blinked away the fog and resituated himself. English class. Eraser-shaving smells, off-yellow walls. All of his new classmates stared at him silently. Judging, watching, wondering what was wrong with the new kid.

“Sorry, Mr. Roth,” mumbled Simon. “Guess I dozed off.”

“This is the third time you’ve fallen asleep in my

class, and you've only been at this school two months," Mr. Roth snapped, twisting the paperback book in his hand like he was looking at a bad dog. "This is not good, Mr. Theland. Not good at all."

A sour feeling filled Simon's mind. *Look at this guy, making this big production out of the new kid.*

"You can call me Simon," he said.

The other kids giggled at the remark. Mr. Roth's smirk went hard around the edges.

"I'd rather just call your parents and let them know there's another strike on your record, *Mr. Theland*," he said, turning away from the desk.

Simon's classmates murmured, "Ooooh . . ."

As the teacher walked back to the head of the room, Simon concentrated on Mr. Roth's mind. Something near the back of his throat and the base of his skull flexed.

The cloud of Mr. Roth's thoughts and feelings opened up in his mind's eye. Smug satisfaction. Brittle anger at being talked back to. A deep resentment toward children, unfamiliar ones especially. Excitement at Simon's possible suspension, anticipation of the looks on his parents' faces when he got reported, of seeing Simon broken, head bowed, answering him with a *yes, sir*.

Not this time, thought Simon. He'd promised himself

that at this school, he wasn't going to take it anymore.

"Now, class, as you remember from last night's reading," continued Mr. Roth, "what Esther Forbes wants you to hear is—"

Simon felt around Mr. Roth's mind, locked in on the right part, and pushed.

Mr. Roth's hand swung up. In an instant, the book was jammed in his mouth, muffling his words. The entire class gasped.

Simon let go, not wanting the teacher to choke. He glanced around at his classmates, hoping for pointed fingers, teasing laughter, some kind of public pay-back . . . but all he saw were frightened faces. As Mr. Roth pulled the spit-covered book from his mouth, one of Simon's classmates, Emily Grossman, stood up to help him. Mr. Roth blinked, frightened, and dropped the book like it was red-hot. Mercifully, the bell rang.

As Simon left the classroom, he dragged the back of his hand under his nose.

No blood. Not even an orange smear.

He was getting better at this.

He scarfed lunch alone, as always—pretty good rice and beans, which seemed to be the one plus side to

moving to the Southwest—and then headed outside for the rest of his free period. Plenty of his classmates hung out on the old, dusty playground equipment in the schoolyard, while others sat on the benches along the fence that lined the basketball courts, looking at one another's phones and talking. Simon thought of approaching a couple of the kids from his class, saying, *What's up . . .* but when they saw him, they covered their mouths and whispered, *It's him. That new kid that all the weird stuff happens around.* At least that's what he thought he heard. Maybe Aly was making him paranoid. Eventually, he wandered off to the edge of the fence and stared out at the mountains.

New Mexico. It was so unlike his hometown—no bushy trees, no ponds or lakes, just scraggly red dirt and prickly-looking bushes for miles. Even the other places where his family had lived over the past year and a half—from Pennsylvania to Chicago to Texas to Iowa—had nothing on this Martian landscape. All the houses were small adobe squares that looked like someone had coated shoeboxes with red clay, with the Sandia Mountains looming menacingly in the distance. When he'd heard there were mountains, he'd expected snowy peaks covered with pine trees.

This looked like a giant had built a sandcastle.

He sighed. At least they were far away from home. And from Rachael.

That was what was important. Aly always told him, “Nothing matters but staying safe and making sure she can’t find us.”

Even if that meant being alone in the wasteland . . .

“Zombie. I’m talking to you.”

Anger in the voice. He knew he should mind his own business, but his eyes followed the sound.

There, at the opposite corner of the fencing. A rangy boy and a girl stared down at another girl, with a curly bob and tons of freckles. He’d seen the two standing, and had heard about them around school—the Franklin twins, Ariana and Kirk. Tough kids, from out in the hills. The girl they were talking to was Lena Oneiro, who was in his history class. People called her Lena the Zombie because of her expressionless face and slow walk.

Lena sat with a paper bag in her lap, slowly chewing a bite of sandwich. She didn’t look up at the twins, just stared straight ahead, munching away.

“Are you deaf *and* super creepy?” Ariana asked. She snatched the triangle of sandwich out of Lena’s hand and tossed it away. Lena never budged.

“Must be totally brain-dead,” said Kirk. “Let me try.” He leaned down close to her and barked, “GIVE. US. YOUR. CHIPS. ZOMBIE. DO. YOU. UNDERSTAND?”

“Man, she’s a mess,” Ariana commented. She kicked red dirt onto Lena’s crossed legs. Lena blinked, dust obviously getting in her eyes. But she barely flinched.

This was enough for Simon. He’d been that kid. Frozen in the face of bullies. Unable to even move.

Not at this school.

“Hey,” he said, walking over to them. The twins looked up, and he saw worry cross their faces. That was good. That meant they’d heard about him.

“Mind your own business,” said Kirk. He stepped forward and held up his hand—but, Simon noticed, he didn’t face up against Simon, even though Simon was at least a head shorter than him. His old bully Bentley would’ve just grabbed him by the collar.

They were scared.

He tried not to like that so much.

“Can I ask you something?” he said. “As twins, do you guys *have* to hang out together, or are you so bad at making real friends that you’re just stuck together?”

Kirk chuckled without a smile. Ariana turned away from Lena, lips curling into a snarl.

That one must have struck a nerve, Simon thought.

“That’s it—I don’t care what anyone says about you,” Kirk muttered.

“Take him out, Kirk,” said Ariana.

Kirk’s hand snapped out. Grabbed Simon’s shoulder. Hard.

Simon found their minds with his . . . and squeezed.

Kirk’s hand flew from Simon’s shoulder and up to his own temple. He and Ariana fell to their knees, clutching at their heads, letting out squawking cries of pain. Somewhere inside himself, Simon felt the urge to take it further, to push harder, make them beg forgiveness.

Then he thought about how that sounded, and let go of their minds.

“Get out of here,” he commanded. The Franklin twins scrambled to their feet and left, but not before Ariana snapped “FREAK” at him.

When Simon turned to Lena, her face was still relatively frozen—but her eyes were wider than usual, and they were locked on him.

“Are you okay?” Simon asked. She nodded. “Those guys won’t pick on you anymore.”

Lena shrugged.

Man, what is going on with her? Simon thought. Out of habit, he reached his mind out to hers, to get a sense of her thoughts, her intentions, and—

endless

Simon blinked. He took a step backward, slapped a hand to his forehead.

He'd never experienced anything so vast, so deep, as this girl's mind. She was different. She was . . .

"You're . . . you're like me," said Simon, almost without meaning to.

Lena tensed up. In an instant, she stood and started walking away without even picking up her lunch trash or brushing off her legs.

"Wait!" Simon called out, but she was already half-way across the basketball courts and on her way back into school. He considered running after her when he felt his phone buzz in his pocket. A text from Aly.

Come to my room after school, it said. Be careful. Don't talk to anyone.

Why? he wrote.

Her response came immediately, and Simon felt a chill dance across his skin.

There's been another fire. I think it's her.