

It takes less time for them to conquer the world than it takes me to brush my teeth. That's pretty disappointing.

I'm in history class, listening to Mr. Whitehead's description of the Great Depression. "Everything was changed," he says, tapping his desk with two fingers the way he does when he wants to call attention to something he's said. I know he's about to repeat himself because he always does after the finger tap. I turn to Jackson to mouth the sentence as Mr. Whitehead speaks it, which is something we do to combat the big-yawn boredom.

But the second sentence never comes from Mr. Whitehead. It doesn't come from Jackson or me, either. Instead a voice comes into my head. THAT'S RIGHT.

A VOICE. NOT MINE. IN MY HEAD. The voice says, *You are one of the few product who can hear. Congratulations. Stand by for a message.*

Stand by for a message sounds like some kind of public-service announcement, so naturally I'm thinking I'm crazy. I'm imagining I'm bound for a room with locks on the outside and keepers in white coats asking me questions along the lines of "Would you like another cookie?"

But there really is a message. It comes a second later.

I am Lord Vertenomous and I claim this planet in the name of the Republic of Sanginia. You have been conquered by the greatest beings in the known universe. It took ten seconds.

The world is conquered in ten seconds? Come on. Also, the voice itself isn't particularly scary. Not like the breathy, booming voice of, say, Darth Vader. It's more of a whisper and a little squeaky around the edges. In fact, I'm kind of disappointed that the imagination of my damaged mind couldn't do better. But then I notice what I've been too freaked to notice before. No one is moving. Every single person, including Mr. Whitehead, looks sound asleep. I feel a shadow over me then, and it practically knocks me off my feet. I struggle to breathe. I force deep breaths. Then I do what you do when people are sleeping at a totally inappropriate

time and in a totally inappropriate place. I try to wake them. I shake Carlee Thorton, who is the best student in school and would never, ever fall asleep in class. I punch Jackson on the arm.

“Jackson, dude, it’s me, Jesse. Wake up,” I plead. He doesn’t.

I don’t know it then, but this is what happens to most of the Earth’s population. They go to sleep. They never wake up.

I try my cell but it’s dead. I go out into the hall and try some good old-fashioned screaming. No one screams back.

I’m all alone.

It’s so quiet.

The alien voice comes back. My body jerks as if a cold hand has grabbed me from behind, and my heart, which definitely wasn’t doing a slow jog before, sprints. The voice says, *It should be clear that you are weak and we are strong. You are now our slave, unless you are unable to be a slave, in which case you are dead. We are sorry for your loss. This is a most excellent planet. Lovely blue sky. Most excellent green vegetation. We are going to like it here. Thank you for not completely destroying it.*

I do what a lot of people (I find out later) who remain awake do. I run. I run toward home.

I get only a few feet beyond the school doors before the truth of the alien’s claims hits me. I have to stop.

I heave my breakfast right there on the sidewalk. Cars are crashed all over the place. Bodies fallen everywhere: people, birds, squirrels, dogs, and cats. I step over and around the bodies. So many of them. But the strange thing is that most people look like they're asleep. It looks like they just got very tired all at once and lay down for a nap.

"Anybody?" I shout as I start to run. "Anybody here?"

But nobody is. People are all over the place, but they aren't here. Nothing is. No sounds at all. I even think for a second that maybe I've lost my hearing, but I can hear my own short, sharp breaths.

I don't make it home. I make it about two blocks before the Sanginians stop me. In the same way the alien voice didn't inspire terror, the aliens don't look particularly frightening. They're not giant roaches or hooded, hollow-eyed ghoul types or even some version of the biggest-foreheads-in-the-universe Klingons. They're small. I'm just six feet and I tower over them. They appear to be hairless. Their eyes are large and round, almost cartoonish. Their skin has a slight green tint to it. I suppose maybe they could be from some remote tribe in the Amazon, the kind you'd see on a National Geographic special or something. If you had to sum them up with a quick description, you'd say "little green men."

They ask me to please come with them. I'm a wrestler and I have a black belt in tae kwon do, and my father was in the Special Forces and taught me a lot of moves. I try to punch one and kick the other, but I can't do either. They stop me without so much as moving a finger. I'm screaming in pain; I drop helplessly to my knees.

Please come with us, one of them says. This time I notice that his mouth doesn't move.

I get up, but my mind is filled with a thick fog. Everything is distant and unclear. I join a group of people; they herd us to downtown Houston. I step over and around bodies all the way. It's like being in a nightmare, like I'm not really all there. Large ships land everywhere. They pick up bodies with some kind of device that sucks them up into the ships. They're like gigantic, sucking garbage-truck ships and we're the garbage. I want to scream, but I can't. I'm ashamed and I'm helpless.

I'm put in this big room in a building. There are alien guards all around. Once we're inside, I slowly begin to feel more like myself. I'm able to move again on my own, able to form thoughts that feel like mine. I think, *Where are my parents? Are they alive? Is anyone I love, like, or even know alive?*

I look around. Most people look the way I feel: dazed and exhausted. A woman in the corner is crying.

A man keeps pulling a quarter out of his pocket and putting it back in and pulling it out again. A couple starts arguing, shouting at each other. One of the aliens tells them to stop, but they don't listen. You can tell they are the kind of people who have lived their lives not listening. The alien does something, and they drop. It's like they've been shot through the heart.

"I'm sorry for your loss," the alien says to the dead bodies like you'd say "Excuse me" to someone you bumped into passing down a hall. One thing you have to say about these aliens is they're very polite. They are probably the most polite killers around. My mother is big on manners, and I can't help thinking she'd approve, except for the killing part of course.

We spend the night in the building, which I realize is a bank. It has teller windows and a vault and all. I could probably go help myself to as much money as I want. The aliens wouldn't care. The money is as worthless as dirt to them. I guess it's as worthless as dirt to us now, too.

The next morning they assign us to numbered groups. I'm in a group assigned to work downtown. They tell us we are slaves now, what they call *product*, and that eventually we will have private masters. For now we're the property of the Republic of Sanginia, the greatest republic in the known universe. They think a

lot of themselves. They're the greatest beings from the greatest republic. What are we? We're nothing.

Houston is like a ghost town. A few days later, I'm taken to Austin, and it's like a ghost town there, too. I guess it's like a ghost planet. No buildings have been destroyed, no houses. At first glance the world doesn't look all that different. But it feels different. It feels empty. It sounds empty, too. It's so quiet. More than anything, the silence makes me feel what I've lost. The Earth is no longer ours.

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There are thirty-one people on our crew. Twenty guys and eleven girls. I've asked around. The oldest person here is forty and the youngest is thirteen. Most are in their teens and twenties. It was the same way at the bank. Apparently, a couple of people on the crew saw kids survive, but there aren't any kids here and there weren't any at the bank. Where are they?

The crew I'm working on and several other crews are assigned to the task of gathering machines. We gather them from offices and condos. Anywhere there's a machine, we find it. When we do, we take it to places the aliens have set up to destroy the machines. I'm talking about cars, computers, phones, toasters, microwaves, even televisions. The aliens really seem to enjoy destroying them. What could an alien have against TV? This is another alien behavior my mom

would approve of. She thought TV lowered everyone's IQ every time they watched it.

About two weeks later, after a long morning of collecting machines, a bus pulls up. The Sanginian who's been ordering us around all day orders me and this guy named Michael to get in.

You're being transferred to Lord Vertenomous's house. Congratulations.

"Why congratulations?" I ask.

They don't like questions. And they're not big on answers. Mostly they just look at us with those big creepy eyes. But the boss Sanginian surprises me and answers. *Because you are superior product.*

"Like a good pair of shoes?" I say.

He stares at me with those big creepy eyes and then turns away. One answer is all I get.

Michael and I take the last two seats at the back of the bus. I think he's a little older than I am, but I don't know much about him. I've heard he was a big-time football player in Florida. He looks like an athlete. He also looks like someone who thinks a lot of himself.

We're going down streets we haven't gone down before. We pass other crews loading machines into the alien transport ships.

"How's it feel?" Michael says. First words he's ever said to me.

“What?”

“Being a slave.”

“It’s great,” I say. “How about you?”

He wants attitude, I’ll give him attitude. When the situation calls for it, I am an excellent attitude giver.

“It’s in my genes, right?” he says. “I should be real good at it.”

He smiles at me, but it isn’t a real smile. His jaw clenches, and his eyes get small and hard, and I can see how much he’d like to hit something—me, he thinks, but really just something.

“Right,” I say, trying to be sarcastic.

I get the feeling Michael wants an apology from me, which I don’t understand exactly.

“You think that’s right?”

“You ever heard of the word *sarcasm*?”

Michael is trying to stare me down. I pretend I don’t notice. He looks away, out the window. “I was going to be a star. I was going to have whatever I wanted. Everyone said so. Pro football star. I wasn’t a jerk about it, either. Not me. I was humble. What an idiot.”

“Why an idiot?” I say, curious in spite of myself.

“I should have been grabbing everything I could.”

Even though I don’t like the guy’s attitude and am not especially fond of football stars and egomaniacs in general, I know what he means. What did I miss by

not grabbing everything I could? And now it's gone. Everything's gone.

"I can see that," I say.

"You can't see anything. You aren't me."

Again, the attitude. Does he really think he's the only one who's lost anything, everything?

Michael bangs the seat in front of him with an open hand. "Now here I am two hundred years ago. Somebody's property."

"We both are."

"Don't give me that *both* stuff. You don't know. It isn't in you like it's in me."

I feel the need to point out the obvious. "You haven't been a slave."

"I've got the memory in me, and I can't get rid of it. You know how I know this is true? I always thought something was gonna come and take everything away from me. I always thought that. My mother and my sisters told me I was crazy, but here we are."

"You always thought that?"

"That's right. I knew something like this was gonna happen."

"Like little green men from outer space were going to invade Earth and ruin your football career? You knew that?"

He glares at me. I glare back. Then, I don't know why exactly, but we both kind of smile. And once we

smile, we start laughing. I can't even say what's so funny, but I can't stop laughing. People on the bus turn around and look at us like we're crazy. I realize then I haven't heard laughter in what seems like an eternity.

When Michael stops, he says, "Okay, Tex. Maybe you got me there."

We arrive at the great lord's house, which is more like a palace. Someone has chopped off the top of a hill to build it. A stone wall, like the wall of a castle, surrounds it. The grounds are lush, with plants and trees. Fountains and pools are linked by a stream that gurgles and twists its way through the grounds. Whoever owned this before the alien invasion must have been a billionaire. He must have had so much money he could do anything he wanted. But it didn't do him any good when the aliens came. If he's alive, he's just like the rest of us now. Product.

Two other buses are unloading in the large brick parking area. It's like before. Most of the people are young, with a few older people and no kids. I notice a girl who looks a little like Paris Hilton. I see that Michael notices her, too.

Six Handlers are in the parking area to watch us. I've only seen one Handler before, but they're easy to spot. They're warriors. They're a little bigger than the

other Sanginians, and they carry themselves like my dad and his friends, like soldiers.

One of the Handlers herds us inside. It's like he's all around us, like he's able to multiply himself so there are suddenly thirty or forty of him. He tells us, in our minds, that we are superior product and have been chosen to work in the House of Lord Vertenomous, the leader of the invasion and First Citizen of the colony.

If he expects me to be impressed or thankful, he can forget it. But he doesn't seem to expect anything—unless you count total obedience. He's pretty clear about that. *I expect total obedience. If I do not get that from you, then you can expect total death. I will be sorry for your loss.*

Boys go to the second floor and girls to the third. Five or six to a room. We're going to have to sleep on the floor, but at least they put out pillows and blankets and sheets. Michael and I make up places over by a window.

"Aren't we lucky to be superior product?" I say. "We get to be Lord Vert's slaves."

"Lord Vert?" Michael says. Then nods and smiles. "Yeah, okay, Lord Vert."

"Lord Vert, big-time First Citizen of the Sans."

"We're probably never going to leave here," Michael says, looking out the window.

“Don’t say that,” I say. “Just don’t. *Sexual intercourse*. I hate the *illegitimate sons* so much.”

Michael doesn’t know me all that well, but he’s giving me the look I get a lot from my friends. I mean *got* a lot. One they especially gave me when I invented alternatives to swearing.

“It’s my mom,” I tell him. “She was an English teacher. She said swearing was just a form of laziness, so she convinced my dad and me to come up with alternatives. It was kind of like a game. I got in the habit of it. Once at a wrestling match I called my opponent a son of a female dog and a fatherless biped. The guy was so confused, I got a two-point takedown.”

Michael shakes his head. “Dude, I’ve known people who pretend to be crazy, but you, my friend, are the real deal.”

Sure, I hear the rest of it, but what I hear loudest is “my friend” and somehow, in spite of everything, this makes me feel a little better.