

INHERITANCE OF STARS

NEW WORLDS

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For Mum. Thanks for always being there for me...

... and for the schnitzel every Sunday...

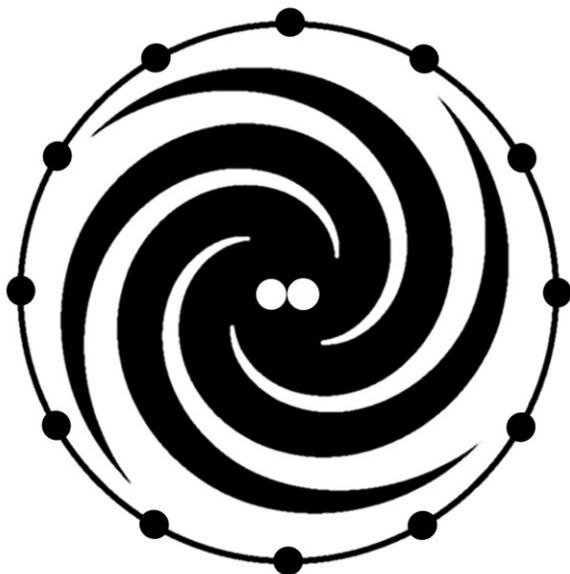
Without home, life is torture.

- Fyodor Dostoevsky

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CHAPTER 1

TRANSFORMATION

Mike opened his eyes and was forced to immediately close them again, a bright light directly above him was blindingly intense. He tried to raise his hand but it was bound to the table beside him. He desperately strained against his restraints a few times, but he couldn't break free. He was lying on his back on the cold metal table, unable to move an inch, and even his head was held in place by some kind of clamp.

He felt tears well up in his eyes and he struggled to remember how he had ended up here. He could only remember that he was going home from school but he had been caught in a bad thunderstorm that soaked him to the skin.

He remembered Bob and his gang. They had been bullying Mike since he had started school and they had stolen his umbrella lots of times, whenever a storm threatened. Mike was a nobody at school and the other kids mostly shunned him or made fun of him. Even Mike's teachers did the same. Some of them enjoyed harassing him, especially the sports teacher.

Mike's skull was pounding and it felt like there was a lump on the back of his head. His memory was slowly returning, but this just

seemed to make his headache worse. He remembered the narrow path that led to his parents' home in the middle of the woods, and he also remembered his fear. Something seemed to be following him, something sinister in a long black robe, with glowing red eyes. He couldn't protect himself. Whatever it was, it just beat him to the ground, and he couldn't remember what happened after that. He thought he had seen a horribly disfigured face, with metal plates and cables sprouting from the back of its head.

Get these restraints off me, Mike's thoughts pleaded, and again he was overcome by a terrible wave of fear when he thought about the creature. He shook his restraints once more, a river of tears running down his face.

"Please, let me go," Mike said meekly, in the hope somebody would hear him.

Hours went by and the light above Mike didn't dim at all. He lay there, bound to the table and crying quietly, his limbs starting to hurt from the tightness of the restraints and the pounding in his head seeming to get worse with every passing second.

He thought he could hear the dull hum of huge machines, seemingly in the midst of some endless production run. Sometimes he thought he could hear low stamping noises and, now and again, voices, somewhere off in the distance.

Suddenly Mike heard a quiet hissing noise and shambling footsteps somewhere nearby, and they sounded like they were coming directly towards him. He heard a rattling breath near his

ear. Mike whimpered, as he suddenly caught the smell of something foul.

“Please, don't hurt me. I just want to go back to my mum and dad,” he begged, his voice almost silent.

A dark shadow interposed itself between Mike and the light above him. “Hurt you?” a voice like a death rattle asked, and Mike began to shiver uncontrollably. He tried to blink the tears from his eyes.

“I'm not going to hurt you,” the voice continued, “I'm your doctor. I just want to help you.”

A wave of relief flooded through Mike's body and he blinked away the last of his tears. “Are my parents here, as well?”

“No, my ugly little friend. Unfortunately, your parents couldn't be here to marvel at my work. But you have me. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Bloodmind,” the doctor said.

The name gave Mike the shivers, and he almost started crying again. “Why am I restrained on this table? I want to go.”

“It's for your protection as much as mine, while I get on with my work. I hope you understand. But we can take that restraint off your head and we don't need all this light. If I can do anything to make this process any more comfortable for you, all you have to do is say,” the doctor told him, then giggled softly to himself, which gave Mike goosebumps.

He heard a low metallic squeak as the clamp was taken from his head. As soon as it was loose enough he turned his head to the side, away from the blinding light, and wiped a couple of tears on his shoulders. A switch was flicked and the light above him immediately became dimmer.

Mike almost screamed out loud when he saw the small table at the side of the one he was fastened to. It held a large selection of dangerous looking surgical instruments, including a drill, several knives that looked more like handsaws than scalpels, a large syringe and a few containers holding a thick, black liquid.

Panicking now, Mike turned his gaze away from the instruments and instead looked in the other direction. This time he did scream. He was looking directly at a blood spattered surgeon's apron.

“Hey, don't worry, it's all going to be okay,” the voice said, in a tone that was anything but calming. “I've introduced myself, so it's a little rude not to follow suit.”

“M-M-Mike,” Mike stammered and directed his eyes slowly upwards.

The apron belonged to a gaunt man, wearing an equally blood spattered mask and glasses with lenses so thick and dark that there was no hint of his eyes behind them. “Please don't hurt me. I just want to go home,” Mike whimpered.

Bloodmind laid his bony hand on Mike's head and gave him an encouraging pat. "I'm not going to hurt you, quite the contrary, I'm going to improve you."

"Improve me?" Mike stammered, panic in his voice, and snatched his head from Bloodmind's grip. He turned his head to look around the room, and tried his best not to start crying. He had never been particularly strong or fast or clever, and his parents spent a lot of their time arguing about which of them should look after him. They usually dumped him with a nanny because he didn't have any friends he could go to.

Mike was desperately looking for an escape route, but the only exit looked like it was barred shut. There were two men standing by it, wearing what looked a little like suits of armour. They were armed with long-barrelled guns, fed from drums of ammo. There was a huge mirror on the other side of the room, taking up the entire wall. Mike saw a couple of ventilation shafts above him in the ceiling and he thought he might be able to squeeze through one of them. The remaining walls looked like they were riveted together from metal plates.

Mike felt a shiver go down his spine when he saw that the black metal men were staring at him, each of them almost two metres tall with cold, red eyes. Mike didn't think for a second that he would be able to get by them.

They've got guns.

"This is a little experiment that I designed myself," the doctor said, and giggled maniacally as he stroked the tools on the table.

“Please, my parents have a lot of money,” Mike begged between sobs.

“The pitiful wealth amassed by your parents is of no interest to me,” the doctor replied, his voice cold, and he picked up the syringe. “You should consider it an honour to be in my presence, not many are lucky enough to meet me in person.”

“They'll look for me, and when they find me, they'll put you in prison.”

Bloodmind exploded into loud laughter. “They'll never find you here, my ugly little friend, we're much too far away for your pitiful human technology to have a hope of reaching us here. As for prison, we are already within one, and I am the governor,” Bloodmind said, laughing maniacally and spreading his arms wide. “Nobody is going to find you here, you're all mine.”

“Please ... I am ... am ... a very ... erm ... important person.”

“Don't you lie to me! You're a nobody, useless, a fat little idiot, which is precisely why the catcher selected you. I'm afraid that nobody is going to miss you, and nobody is going to care what happens to you.” Bloodmind giggled. “But don't worry, you'll do just fine for what I have in mind.”

“I'm not a nobody...” Mike said, his voice quiet.

“Oh yes you are, otherwise I wouldn't be having the pleasure of making your acquaintance.”

“Is that thing that was following me a catcher?” Mike asked, his voice still low.

Bloodmind inserted the needle of the syringe into one of the containers of black liquid, and filled it. The red eyes of the metal men watched, neither of them moving at all.

“Another one of my inventions. I hope you realise how significant it is for a great doctor, such as myself, to stoop to working with the likes of you. It was difficult to make the catchers so pliable, requiring a considerable amount of alteration. Did you like my catcher?”

Mike couldn't speak for sheer terror at the sight of Bloodmind extracting the syringe from the bottle. The viscous liquid moved languidly within.

“Please...”

“Oh, please, please, please, what use is it to keep begging like this. It's starting to get boring, hearing the same word over and over. Why can't anyone ever come up with anything more original to say. Ah yes, before I forget, I have to ask you to excuse my appearance. Before you, I had a little bit of a tussle with a Tarkan, a damned obstinate species. But they all come round in the end, just as you will.”

Bloodmind stepped towards Mike, the syringe in his hand, accompanied by a terrible smell of decay. Bloodmind slowly raised the syringe while Mike tried to wriggle free of the restraints. The restraints seemed to tighten around his limbs

with every attempt to break free. He felt his hands and feet go numb.

“Why are you doing this?” Mike asked between sobs, still hoping he could persuade Bloodmind not to inject him.

“Why?” Bloodmind repeated, the syringe lowering. “On his orders,” Bloodmind said, tapping the side of his head with a finger. “I receive his orders right here. He told me to make sure new test subjects are gathered and that they are then modified, so we can use them in battle.”

“B-B-But that's just a voice in your head.”

Bloodmind giggled like a lunatic. “No, that's what everybody says when they are on the table. He's real, just as real as you and me, and he gives me orders. You can't disobey his orders. Anyone who does is severely punished.” Bloodmind raised the syringe again and placed it against Mike's neck.

Mike pulled away from it as far as he could, turning his head away so he didn't have to look at it. He desperately tried to break free, thrashing backward and forward as best he could.

“Hold still!” Bloodmind hissed at Mike. “No-good human! The Drazal are so much easier to handle, they know when they are beaten. You're just postponing the inevitable, your fate is sealed.”

“Please ...” Mike begged again and began to weep, his sobs filling the room. His eyes closed tight and he stopped struggling.

“Ah, look at this, now the human's crying,” Bloodmind quietly giggled. “Don't worry, it will only hurt a hell of a lot.” Bloodmind burst into peals of maniacal laughter.

Then Mike felt the prick of the needle in his neck and screamed. He could feel the contents of the syringe flowing into him. A moment or two later, Bloodmind withdrew the needle. Mike didn't feel any different. He cautiously opened his eyes again, still quietly sobbing. He was flooded by sheer terror at the thought of what was inside the syringe.

“There you go,” Bloodmind said. “You see, that wasn't so bad now, was it? It will take a moment or two before the mutagen takes effect. It's another of my inventions.” Again Bloodmind laughed hideously.

“You're crazy, completely nuts,” Mike stammered, his voice hoarse from crying while an uncomfortable warm feeling spread from the area where he had been injected.

“I prefer the term, visionary. Can you feel how the serum is already taking effect? It took decades to develop, and there was a lot of sacrifice, but now it has been perfected. Thanks to you humans. You can be used in so many different ways. But, I'm afraid we still need to do more trials.”

Mike felt a horrible tingling sensation spreading through his entire body. The feeling wasn't confined to his skin, but was also deep within him, even in his bones. Then he felt some pain from his fingertips, and they started to turn dark brown, his fingernails growing at lightning speed and curling into claws.

His veins also started to turn brown and this colour kept on spreading. Mike's whole body suddenly clenched up in agony as the tingling sensation transformed into burning pain. Mike had never in his life felt this much pain. It felt like every cell in his body was on fire.

Mike let out an ear-splitting scream as he jackknifed against his restraints. He could feel how his body was changing. His legs seemed to be getting thinner but more muscular and both his toenails and his feet became elongated, until they had become the same claws as his fingernails.

His skin pulled painfully tighter around his body and his ribs started to stick out. He felt the teeth in his mouth becoming longer and sharper, and something was growing just above his backside. There was more pain as his body became enlarged and his muscles grew. His clothes ripped and fell to the table he was still fastened to.

Mike screamed louder and louder, the screams changing in tone until they sounded more like the roaring of a beast than the screams of a person.

The pain became unbelievable as Mike's head elongated and a tail sprouted from his behind. At the end of it, a dagger-like protrusion of bone formed. His fingers and his feet reached the end of their transformation and were now considerably longer and terminated in claws. He felt his new, stronger muscles flexing beneath his leathery hide. But the pain didn't subside, instead Mike felt like his insides were burning.

He screamed again, loud and long. Bloodmind, meanwhile, stood silently at his side, his arms folded behind his back, contentedly watching Mike's transformation. The metal forms showed no sign of emotion. Bloodmind seemed to be smiling coldly to himself behind his surgeon's mask.

After what seemed to Mike to be an eternity, the pain at last started to subside and he relaxed in his metal restraints, which were now tighter than ever.

Numbed by the pain, Mike looked up into the dim light above him and it seemed brighter than before. He quickly looked away to the side. His gaze caught a hand that didn't seem to belong to him. He tried moving one of his fingers, and the finger he was looking at moved too. So it was his hand, but now it was a muddy brown and equipped with long claws.

Mike felt panic threatening to overwhelm him again, and he tried to look at the rest of his body, but it took an effort to turn his head. The body he was looking at couldn't possibly be his, he thought, it was the twisted body of a monster. The brown leathery hide, the powerful muscles beneath, the thick veins and protruding bones looked horrific.

His senses seemed to have gone through their own transformation because everything was pin sharp with a red hue. Smells were more intense. Mike screamed in terror, but the noise he heard from his own throat was even more frightening. His voice was barely human any more, just like the rest of his body.

Mike could feel a new limb, a kind of tail that he could hardly control.

“It works,” Bloodmind said quietly, his voice bursting with joy. “After all these years, and so many attempts, it finally works. It still isn't perfect, but it works.”

“What have you done to me?” Mike screamed in panic, but all that emerged from his throat were almost unintelligible sounds.

“I told you I was going to improve you. You look wonderful. I don't normally like to sing my own praises, but you've turned out so well,” Bloodmind said laughing. “Now it's time to bring you under control, my little experiment.”

Bloodmind picked up the drill in one hand and one of the cleavers in the other. Mike screamed in fear and struggled as hard as he could against his restraints. Bloodmind stepped behind Mike's head. He could smell the terrible odour that Bloodmind gave off even more distinctly now. Mike suddenly felt one of the restraints give in a little, and he pulled at it with all his strength. It suddenly came away all together and Mike's claws struck at the air. Bloodmind immediately sprang back a couple of steps. Mike launched a powerful strike at him.

“Grab him,” Bloodmind yelled to his metal servants.

At their master's command they lunged towards Mike, putting their guns on their backs as they ran. Mike swung at one of the metal forms before it could reach him. His claws penetrated the chest armour of one, exposing the wires and hydraulics beneath.

The metal creature didn't seem to notice, and it grabbed Mike's wrist in a vice-like grip. Mike tried to escape, but he couldn't get his second hand free. He lashed out in the direction of the other metal creature with his new tail, but he didn't have good control over the tail and didn't hit as cleanly as he wanted.

The dagger-like point did hit the second metal creature, but it got stuck in its hip. The metal man didn't allow this to distract it, and it grappled Mike before he could pull out his tail.

"Very good," Bloodmind said appreciatively. "Much stronger than expected, strong enough even to penetrate a knight's armour. I'm impressed, you're a very nice specimen. It's fascinating that you can use your tail at such an early stage."

The metal forms had a firm grip on Mike, and he couldn't shake free no matter how hard he tried. Then he heard Bloodmind switch on the drill, a horribly high-pitched noise filling the room.

"Struggle all you want. Your pitiful attempts to escape just make this all the more entertaining," Bloodmind said, laughing like he had completely lost his mind, and placed the drill against Mike's head.

"Nooooo!" Mike shrieked with his distorted voice and tried again to escape. Once again his efforts were in vain. There was nothing he could do to free himself from the grip of the metal figures. The next moment he felt the drill penetrate the back of his head and touch bone. Mike suddenly stopped moving and lay still. The drill broke through the bone and plunged into Mike's brain.

“Now you belong to me,” Mike heard Bloodmind say, before he fell unconscious.