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IT could have begun in any town. Bacon's Corner was nothing special, just one of those little farming towns far from the interstate, nothing more than a small hollow dot on the AAA road map, with exit signs that offered gas, no lodging, maybe a little food if the place was open, and little more.

But it began in Bacon's Corner.

It was a normal Tuesday evening. The workday was over, supper was on in most of the homes, the stores were locking up, the tavern was filling up. All the employees at the Bergen Door Company had clocked out, and the security guard was checking the locks. Mr. Myers's son was bringing all the lawn mowers and tillers in for the night at the Myers Feed and Farm Store. The lights were winking out in the local mercantile. Two retirees sat in their chairs in front of the barbershop, putting in their idle hours.

The fields and farms right across the Toe Springs–Claytonville Road were getting warmer and greener with each day, and now the evening breeze was carrying a lot of mid-April smells—apple and cherry blossoms, plowed dirt, a little mud, some cattle, some manure.

It was a normal Tuesday evening. No one expected anything unusual. No one saw or heard a thing. No one could have.

But the commotion started behind a dismal little rented farmhouse just south of Fred Potter's place—a flapping, a fluttering, a free-for-all, and then a cry, a long, eerie shriek, an echoing, slobbering wail that raced into the forest like a train whistle through a town, loud, muffled, loud, muffled, moving this way and that through the trees like a hunted animal; then a flash of light, a fireball, blinking and burning through the forest, moving with blinding speed, right behind that siren, almost on top of it.

More cries and screams, more flashing lights! Suddenly the forest was filled with them.

The trees ended abruptly where the Amhurst Dairy began. The chase broke into the open.

First out of the forest came a bug, a bat, a black, bulb-eyed thing, its dark wings whirring, its breath pouring out like a long yellow ribbon. It just couldn't fly fast enough, but clawed the air with its spidery arms, desperate for speed and shrieking in total panic.

Right behind it, so close, so dangerously close, the sun itself exploded out of the forest, a brilliant comet with wings of fire tracing a glimmering trail and a sword of lightning outstretched in burly bronze hands.

The black thing and the comet shot into the sky over Bacon's Corner, zigzagging, shooting this way and that like wild fireworks.

Then the forest, like a row of cannons, spewed out more hideous creatures, at least twenty, each one fleeing in utter panic with a dazzling, flaming figure tenaciously on its tail, scattering in all directions like a crazy meteor shower in reverse.

The first demon was running out of tricks and maneuvers; he could feel the heat of the warrior's blade right at his heels.

He spit over his shoulder, "No, turn away, I am going!"

The fiery blade cut an arc through the air. The demon met it with his own and the blow sent him spinning. He corrected with his wings, turned and faced his assailant, shrieking, cursing, parrying blow after blow, looking into the fiery eyes of more power, more glory, more holiness than he'd ever feared before. And he could see it in those eyes—the warrior would never turn away. Never.

The demon withered even before the blade struck its final blow; it slipped from the earth, from the world of mankind, into outer darkness, gone in a tumbling puff of red smoke.

The warrior turned and soared higher, spinning his long sword above his head, tracing a circle of light. He burned with the heat of battle, the fervor of righteousness.

His fellows were consumed with it, striking demons from the sky like foul insects, vanquishing them with strong swords, relentlessly pursuing them and hearing no pleas.

On the right, a long, slithering spirit took one more swipe at his heavenly assailant before curling tightly in anguish and vanishing.

On the left, a loud-mouthed, boasting imp cursed and taunted his opponent, filling the air with blasphemies. He was quick and confident, and just beginning to think he might prevail. His head went spinning from his body while the proud sneer still twisted the face, and then he was gone.

There was one left. It was spinning, tumbling on one good wing.

"I'll go, I'll go," it pleaded.

"Your name?" ordered the angel.

"Despair."

The warrior swatted the demon away with the flat of his blade, and it fled, gone, yet still able to work evil.

And then it was over. The demons were gone. But not soon enough.

"Is she all right?" asked Nathan the Arabian, sheathing his sword.

Armoth the African had made sure. "She's alive, if that's what you mean."

The mighty Polynesian, Mota, added, "Injured and frightened. She wants to get away. She won't wait."

"And now Despair is free to harass her," said Signa the Oriental.

Armoth replied, "Then it's begun, and there will be no stopping it."

Sally Roe lay in the grass, clutching her throat and gasping for air, taking long, deliberate breaths, trying to clear her head, trying to think. A raw welt was rising on her neck; her plaid shirt was reddened from a wound in her shoulder. She kept looking toward the goat pen, but nothing stirred there. There was no life, nothing left to harm her.

I have to get moving, I have to get moving. I can't stay here—no, not one more minute.

She struggled to her feet and immediately rested against

the farmhouse, her world spinning. She was still nauseous, even though she'd already lost everything twice.

Don't wait. Go. Get moving.

She staggered up the back porch steps, stumbled once, but kept going. She wouldn't take much with her. She couldn't. There wasn't time.

Ed and Mose were quite comfortable, thank you, just sitting there in front of Max's Barber Shop right on Front Street, which is what they called the Toe Springs–Claytonville Road where it passed through town. Ed was sixty-eight, and Mose wouldn't tell anyone his age, so nobody asked him anymore. Both their wives were gone now—God bless 'em, both men had pretty good retirements and Social Security, and life for them had slowed to a comfortable crawl.

"Ain't bitin', Ed."

"You shoulda moved downriver, Mose. Downriver. They get cranky swimmin' clear up to your place. You gotta catch 'em in a good mood."

Mose listened to the first part, but not the second. He was staring at a green Plymouth hurrying through town with two upset children in the backseat.

"Ed, now don't we know those kids there?"

"Where?"

"Well, why don't you look where I'm pointing?"

Ed looked, but all he could see was the back end of the Plymouth and just the tops of two blond heads in the backseat.

"Well," he said, shading his eyes, "you got me there."

"Oh, you never look when I tell you. I know who they were. They were that schoolteacher's kids, that . . . uh . . . what's his name . . ."

Irene Bledsoe sped along the Toe Springs–Claytonville Road, wearing a scowl that added at least a decade to her already crinkled face. She kept her fists tightly around the wheel and her foot on the gas pedal, spurring the green Plymouth onward whether Ruth and Josiah Harris liked it or not.

"You two be quiet now!" she yelled over her shoulder. "Believe me, we're doing this for your own good!"

Bledsoe's words brought no comfort to Ruth, six, and Josiah, nine.

Ruth kept crying, "I want my Daddy!"

Josiah could only sit there silently, numb with shock and disbelief.

Bledsoe hit the throttle hard. She just wanted to get out of town before there was any more trouble, any more attention.

She was not enjoying this assignment. "The things I do for those people!"

Sally stepped out onto the back porch, still trembling, looking warily about. She'd changed her shirt and donned a blue jacket. She gripped her wadded-up, bloodstained plaid shirt in one hand, and a paper towel dipped in cooking oil in the other.

It was quiet all around, as if nothing had happened. Her old blue pickup was waiting. But there was still one more thing to do.

She looked toward the goat pen, its gate swung wide open and the goats long gone. She took some deep breaths to keep the nausea from coming back. She had to go into that little shed once more. She just had to.

It didn't take long. With her heart racing, her hands now empty, and her pockets stuffed, she got out of there and ran for the truck, clambering inside. It cranked and groaned and started up, and with a surge of power and a spraying of gravel it rumbled down the long driveway toward the road.

Irene Bledsoe was speeding, but there were no cops around. The speed limits were inappropriate anyway, just really impractical.

She was coming to a four-way stop, another stupid idea clear out here in the middle of nowhere. She eased back on the throttle and figured she could just sneak through.

What! Where did—?

She hit the brakes, the wheels locked, the tires screamed,

the car fishtailed. Some idiot in a blue pickup swerved wildly through the intersection trying to avoid her.

Little Ruth wasn't belted in; she smacked her head and started screaming.

The Plymouth skidded to a stop almost facing the way it had come.

"Be quiet!" Bledsoe shouted at the little girl. "You be quiet now—you're all right!"

Now Josiah was crying too, scared to death. He wasn't belted in either, and had had quite a tumbling back there.

"You two kids shut up!" Bledsoe screamed. "Just shut up now!"

Josiah could see a lady get out of the pickup. She had red hair and a checkered scarf on her head; she looked like she was about to cry, and she was holding her shoulder. Bledsoe stuck her head out the window and screamed a string of profanity at her. The lady didn't say a thing, but Bledsoe must have scared her. The other driver got back in her truck and drove off without saying a word.

"The idiot!" said Bledsoe. "Didn't she see me?"

"But you didn't stop," said Josiah.

"Don't you tell me how to drive, young man! And why isn't your seat belt fastened?"

Ruth was still screaming, holding her head. When she saw blood on her hand, she went hysterical.

When Bledsoe saw that, she said, "Oh, great! Oh, that's just terrific!"

Cecilia Potter, Fred's wife, was glad that one of those fool goats wore a bell. At least she was able to hear something and run out into the yard before they ate up all her flowers.

The two kids bolted and ran back toward the rental home. As for the doe, she thought she owned anything that grew, and she wasn't timid about it.

"You, GIT!" Cecilia shouted, waving her strong arms. "Get out of those flowers!"

The doe backed off just a little, but then lowered her head, giving Cecilia a good look at her horns.

"Oooh, you're really scary!" said Cecilia. She ran right up, clamped an angry fist around the doe's collar, and lifted the doe's front legs off the ground in turning her around.

"You're going back where you came from, and right now, and don't you think you can scare me!" WAP! "And you lower those horns right now!"

The doe went with Cecilia, mostly on four legs, but on two if she even dared to hesitate, and got more than two earfuls of sermonizing on the way.

"I don't know how you got out, but if you think you're going to run rampant around here, you've got another think coming! Sally's going to hear about this! She knows better! I'm really surprised . . ."

She crossed the field between the two houses and then saw the goat pen, its gate wide open.

"Sally!" she called.

There was no answer. Hmm. The truck was gone. Maybe Sally wasn't home yet. Well, she was late then. She always came home from work before this. But how did that gate get open?

She dragged the doe alongside her and through the gate.

"Back where you belong, old girl. No more of this free and easy stuff—"

Well . . . who was that in the shed?

"Sally?"

The doe, suddenly free, walked out through the still-open gate. Cecilia didn't follow it.

She was looking at the body of a woman, thrown down in the straw like a discarded doll, limp and white.

She was dead.

Nathan, Armoth, and the other warriors made a low, slow pass over the farmhouse and saw a distraught Cecilia running from the goat pen. Nathan gave the others a signal, and with an explosive surge of their wings they shot forward, etching the evening sky with streaks of light.

The fields below them passed by with the swiftness of a thought, and then the green canopy of the forest swallowed

them up, the leaves and branches whipping by, over, around, and through them. They rushed through shadows and shafts of fading light, through tall trunks and thick, entangling limbs, and finally reached the clearing where the captain was waiting.

With wings snapping full like opening parachutes, they came to a halt and settled to the forest floor with the silence of snowflakes. The moment their feet touched down, the lightning glimmer of their tunics faded to a dull white, their fiery swords cooled to copper, and their wings folded and vanished.

Tal, the mighty, golden-haired Captain of the Host, was waiting, his fiery eyes burning with expectation, his face tight with the tension of the moment. Beside him stood Guilo, the Strength of Many, a dark, bearded, massive spirit with thick, powerful arms and a heart yearning for a fight. They were dressed in dull white as well, and wore formidable swords at their sides.

Nathan called his report even as Tal and Guilo were stepping forward to greet them. "All the demons were routed except for Despair."

"Good enough," said Tal. "Let him carry word back to his comrades and then continue his work. Any other spirits from Broken Birch involved in this?"

"Several. Formidable, but defeated for now. We didn't see Destroyer anywhere. He sent his lackeys and stayed out of it himself."

"Of course. Now what of Sally?"

"Sally Roe is fleeing. Her truck is several miles down the road, heading south toward Claytonville. We sent Chimon and Scion to follow her."

"The assassin?" asked Tal.

"Slain, by our hand. We had no choice. Sally was close to death."

Guilo rumbled his approval of the action.

"How is Sally now?" Tal asked.

Armoth reported, "A minor throat injury, a welt on her

neck, a shallow knife wound in the shoulder. No immediate physical danger."

Tal sighed just a little. "No, not immediate anyway. What about the near-collision with Irene Bledsoe?"

Nathan and Armoth looked toward Signa, and the lithe Oriental smiled. "Successful, but by a hair. Ruth Harris suffered a small injury on her forehead, but Sally was clearly seen by everyone in the car, and she saw them just as clearly."

Armoth picked up from there. "And now Mrs. Potter has found the assassin, and she is calling the police."

Tal had to take a moment just to shake his head at the immensity of it all. "Just that is news enough."

Guilo expressed his anxiety with a gravelly chuckle. "Captain, we have never before hoped for so many things to go right . . . that can go so wrong!"

Tal looked toward Heaven and smiled a cautious smile. "We can hope for them all to go right as long as the saints are praying, and they are."

There was a mutter of agreement from all of them. They could feel it.

"So," Tal continued, "if all goes well, this time *we* advance, *we* conquer, *we* set the enemy back . . . *We* purchase just one more season of restraint."

"One more season," they all echoed.

"Sally should arrive in Claytonville safely enough with Chimon and Scion as escorts. The demon Terga has much to answer for now; I expect he'll send some spirits after her to tear her down. Even so, Chimon and Scion have orders not to intervene unless absolutely necessary."

"*More* pain, captain? *More* destruction?" Guilo blurted in anger. "One would think these wretched spirits can never inflict enough suffering!"

Tal looked into those dark eyes, so full of the fire of battle, and yet so tender toward God's elect. "Good friend, we all hurt for her. But her suffering will bring about God's purpose, and you will see it."

"May it come soon," Guilo said, gripping the handle of his

sword. He looked at Nathan and prompted sarcastically, "I'm sure you have more joyful news?"

"Yes," said Nathan. "Of Tom Harris. He is at the police station now, trying to do something to get his children back, trying to reason with Sergeant Mulligan."

At the mention of Mulligan's name, Guilo laughed a roaring, spiteful laugh, and the others made a distasteful face. Nathan only nodded with resignation. They were right.

"So now comes the testing of Tom's faith, a real trying of his commitment," said Tal.

"I'll be watching the saints," said Guilo. "I'll see how they handle this one."

Tal touched Guilo's shoulder. "This will be one of those things we hope will go right."

"Oh, may it go right, may it go right."

"For Tom's sake," said Nathan.

"For *everyone's* sake," said Armoth.

"Which brings us to Ben Cole," Tal prompted.

Nathan responded, "He's about to walk into it right now."