

## ANDI'S BIRTHDAY

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“ARE YOU PACKED FOR MONDAY?” Mom asks as we clear away the dishes from lunch. The blue-black circles under her eyes, which have been there since we got the news about Dad and my brother Mike back in '35, seem darker than usual.

“Pretty much,” I lie. I haven't even started. There isn't much to pack so it doesn't feel like much of an untruth. Besides, when I report for the Corps, like everyone has to do the week after their sixteenth birthday, I'll be given pretty much what I need, including uniforms.

“I'll be home once a month to visit, you know,” I add, trying to reassure her.

“I know, Andi” she says. She turns her shoulder so I can't see her face. After a pause, she says, “If you want to hang out with your friends, I can finish cleaning up here.”

I don't wait for a second invitation.

After grabbing a jacket I head out the door, pausing as my eyes adjust to the semi-light in the hallway. We live in a low-rise in a section of town that is supposed to be uninhabited, this close to the Plague zone. But people need a place to live, and most of the families here can't afford the rent up in New City. At least our building has hot water, which is more than my friend Yappy can say.

When my eyes are used to the light, I boot it down the five flights of stairs and jog over to Skippy's dad's garage, where the gang I run with hangs out. Today, though, there's only Skippy and Yan.

“Yappy has to look after his kid sister,” Yan grunts, “And Mitch promised to help her mom in the garden. As for the rest ...” he shrugs.

I'm not inclined to wait.

“Let's head to the Red Sector,” I suggest.

Skippy digs around in the dirt with his toe.

“You sure? Usually—”

“Today’s isn’t usually,” I snap. “You in, or out?”

“In, of course,” Skippy replies calmly, and Yan nods.

Afternoons are the best times to scavenge. During the morning, you run into people going to work, and after dark—after dark, it’s not safe for anyone to be out. Between my gang and Zoda’s, we’ve pretty much rounded up anything that could possibly be of use and a number of things that wouldn’t, here in the Yellow Sector.

I tell myself that a change of direction might turn something up. Really, though, I’m looking for ways not to think about Monday, when I will be leaving.

So we start toward the Red Sector at a brisk trot. Here, the work crews haven’t been poking around yet with their radiation counters and their paint brushes and their germ swabs. But the fact that there’s been less traffic also means there’s a greater chance of finding something worthwhile.

While my feet are busy, my head is free to think, and I think about birthdays and the way they’ve changed since the Plague and the War that followed. For example, before the Plague, Mom and Dad always asked me what I wanted for my birthday. Now Mom doesn’t bother and I don’t mention it. But what would I want, I wonder? Lots, but what would I want that’s realistic? That’s a much shorter list. A list with no items on it. I chew on that awhile.

It must be thinking about birthdays that brings us down First Street and then to the corner of First and Park Drive. I look at the big barn-like building, at the way the “R” has fallen off “Arena”, and remember . . .

On my ninth birthday, Dad took me to see the Renegades play. He bought me a Renegades jersey and everything. I close my eyes for a moment and can still taste the popcorn, hear the roar of the crowd when Podovski scored the first goal —

My daydream is interrupted by an intense whisper from Yan.

“Trouble,” he says, his brow furrowed beneath the fringe of jet-black hair. He points behind us.

I spin around and see them. Zoda’s in front, and just behind her, tall and lanky, Hap Stanley is lurking. Behind him are Marco and the rest of Zoda’s gang, and they are starting to look around for something to throw in our direction. Usually they miss on

purpose, but sometimes their aim is off and a rock or other object comes too close for comfort, like the time we were near the old driving range and Yappy got hit in the head with a golf ball.

“This way,” Yan hisses, spotting an open door at the side of the building.

We stumble down the stairs, and I dare to flick on the small flashlight at my belt, which is fuelled by precious batteries we found in one of our hunts. “To the right,” I say, remembering the tour of the building I took with my Dad. “The dressing rooms. We’ll be able to lock them.”

The first three doors don’t yield to our push, and I can hear voices approaching the entry way we came in by. To my relief, the next door we try swings open, and we close it firmly and slide the bolt home, careful to make as little noise as possible.

I click the flashlight off, and the sudden darkness is disorienting for a few seconds, until we adjust. We hear tentative footsteps and voices coming down the hallway. From the slowness of their progress, it’s clear none of Zoda’s crew packed a flashlight. We heard them patter past the door, and then stomp back the other way several minutes later.

Time seems endless after that. At one point, I imagine I feel something crawling on my right ear, and I flick at that spot impatiently, relieved not to find anything there. Finally, I think it’s safe, count to one hundred to be doubly sure, then flip the flashlight back on.

We’re in a dressing room, one of the main ones. There are spots for individual players marked along the wall. I spot Podovski’s cubicle, and EJ Smith’s, and Weston’s. I keep the light on, looking at the names around the room, picturing the men and women who occupied those assigned places a few short years ago, until I’m interrupted by a whisper from Skippy.

“What was that? In the corner?”

I take a deep breath and aim the light into the corner. Whatever is there, it isn’t moving, and I’m happy about that.

I take a couple of steps closer and see that the corner is occupied by a shipment of hockey sticks. They were likely delivered around the time the arena was abandoned for good.

The three of us exchange grins. Today's scavenging mission is a success. And our find gives me an idea.

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I get the word to my gang in the usual way, and send a runner to bring the challenge to Zoda. The next day, she and her crew meet us at the old mall parking lot at Green and Mainway.

Hap is carrying construction cones, and I nod in approval. Those'll be our goal posts.

Hap sets himself up in one of the nets. We trot a pair of pylons down to our end and settle Skippy in to guard them, his legs protected with a pair of beat-up street hockey pads that have seen far better days. Skippy taps his pads with his battered goalie stick for good luck, grins, then slips one of his dad's welding helmets over his head as a helmet. "Ready," he says in a muffled voice, waving his softball glove at me.

We dole out the sticks. In memory of my long ago ninth birthday, I'm sporting my Renegades jersey, though it's getting tight around the shoulders and the end of the sleeves stop well before my wrists.

I've brought along one of the ball hockey balls that Mike and I used to play with in the driveway and toss it to Zoda to get things started.

Zoda dekes past Yan, flips the ball to Marco, and the opposing team starts a rush. Yappy intercepts a pass and fires the ball to Yan, who feeds Orrie Harfoot. Orrie looks slow but that's just because he has such long legs. He can cover a lot of ground and he does so now, speeding past the other team's left defence and wisting a bullet at Hap, who shoots out a lazy left hand to snap up the ball in his massive catcher's mitt.

After that, the game rages up and down through the parking lot. The ball takes a crazy bounce every time it hits a pothole, which given the state of the parking lot happens often. We stop for a breather twice, once when we think we've lost the ball when it bounces far past the fallen light standards after one of Orrie's shots misses the net. I look up to see that we've gathered a collection of onlookers, which includes several of the younger neighbourhood kids. A mob of them hustle over to check for

the ball. A pony-tailed girl I take to be around my brother Rafe's age, nine years old or so, comes back carrying it, cradling it in her hands like some kind of rare treasure. She stands by the sideline until Zoda comes over to collect it.

Playing ball hockey on this spring afternoon brings a torrent of memories. I think about afternoons spent with Mike in the driveway, learning how to shoot and deke. I remember the Renegades game with my Dad—where we sat, the way the arena smelled, the way the players seemed to fill the space on the ice surface.

I remember how it felt to glide on an open sheet of freshly-cleaned ice with the game unspoiled and full of possibility ahead. I remember skating on the backyard rink my dad made, and listening to the bird calls in the morning. I remember all these things. I'd forgotten they existed. I'd forgotten how they felt. I'd forgotten what it was like to have fun.

"Next goal wins?" Zoda asks as we pause for another breather. My heart aches at the thought that the game will be over so soon, but the rest of my body has no objection.

I glance over my shoulder. Orrie has his head down and Mitch is resting with one bent knee touching the cracked pavement.

"Yah, I'm good with that," Yappy, bent over to Mitch's left, says. Mitch, who's still out of breath, can only manage a nod.

"It's a deal," I say, turning back to Zoda.

Though the game was intense before, it seems to kick up a notch. That's in spite of the fact that our legs feel like they have weights strapped to them and our sides ache every time we take a breath.

Zoda picks up the ball around where centre ice would be and Orrie gets his legs tangled up, falling to the ground as she flies past. Zoda leans into a slapshot and for a second I think the game's over. At the last minute, Skippy kicks out his right leg and the ball bounces up to Yappy.

Yappy threads a pass through three of Zoda's teammates, somehow finding Mitch at the front of the net. She draws the ball to the right, and Hap moves across the net to stay with her. Then Mitch flips the ball to the left side of the net and I pounce on it, sending it sailing through the pylons before Hap can get back over.

Everyone just stands there, panting, for a moment. Then, without planning it or thinking about it, we line up to shake hands. It seems like the thing to do, as if by entering this game we've bound ourselves to follow certain traditions.

After that, for the first time since we've known each other, the members of the two gangs mingle together and we talk. I find out that Hap lives just up our street, and Zoda discovers that her brother and Yan's brother were friends, before the Plague.

I sit with Yappy and Mitch for a few minutes and we verbally replay the highlights. When we've worn out that topic and I stand up to leave, I can see that most of the neighbourhood kids have drifted off. The pony-tailed girl who went to retrieve the ball is still there, though.

I think about the memories I have about playing hockey back when we had real uniforms, and coaches, and ice, and skates. Judging from her age, there wouldn't have been much time for that, for her.

"You can have this stick, if you want," I offer, holding it out toward her.

"You sure?" she says in a tone that mingles suspicion and longing.

"I'm sure," I say, smiling.

"Hey, kid," Zoda drifts over and nods at the girl. "Bring your friends around if you want in the afternoons, and we'll teach you how to play."

The girl grins and jogs away.

I look at Zoda, my eyebrows raised.

"Why not?" she says with a shrug. "It won't be the same, my gang and yours, without you there. Besides, after this, I was thinking it was time we gave up scrapping with each other anyway."

I nod and turn to head for home, Yappy and Mitch trailing. Zoda lengthens her stride and falls in step beside me.

"You're reporting to Corps training next week?" she asks.

"Yup," I say.

"Scared?"

I'm silent for a moment. How does one reply to a question like that, coming from their former worst enemy? I shrug.

"I go in two months," she offers. "I'm nervous, I guess. Hard to know what to expect."

“Dook Mobrey said it was okay,” I say. “He was home for his first visit last weekend. Found it interesting, actually.”

“Maybe I’ll see you there,” Zoda says. “It would be good to have a friend from the neighbourhood.”

I don’t say anything for a minute or so, to give myself time to think. Yappy, Yan, Mitch, the rest of them, they won’t be going for months. I realize that for a change I’ll actually be glad to see Zoda’s face, when the time comes.

“Yeah, that would be cool,” I say, after a pause, “to have a friend from the neighbourhood.”

And to my surprise, I mean it.

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