



THE TAKEN

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‘As you can see, conditions were truly barbaric.’

Mrs McFee swept an arm at the hologram of the prison cell as her voice tried to capture the horrors. I saw a small comfortable room that once contained criminals and kept them separate from the rest of us, it was much better than what we had now. She shook her head in despair as she continued her lecture.

‘Individuals were only allowed out of such confined spaces for an hour, sometimes two if they were lucky. At times they were even made to share with another prisoner.’

The rest of my class gasped at the idea. Frederick Bassett chimed up with his reedy little voice, eager to show he was paying attention.

‘But, Mrs McFee, surely two criminals placed together like that would influence each other? They could plan other crimes, one might even harm the other one if he or she was weaker.’

‘Exactly Frederick! Not only barbaric, but counter-productive.’

The little creep beamed. I rolled my eyes. She saw me do it.

‘Well, everyone, unsurprisingly Cassandra appears to have a different opinion.’ It provoked the usual groan from my brown-nosed peers. ‘So, Cassandra, why not share your thoughts on the subject?’

I gave her a careless shrug, she wasn’t going to embarrass me.

‘Sounds better than having them wander around the streets like zombies.’

That made her bristle.

‘The Taken are hardly that, Cassandra. They serve society in menial roles which is better than keeping them contained for years at a time and costing taxpayers good money.’

Frederick raised his hand, eager to show what a little creep he was.

‘Plus, Mrs McFee, having had the relevant synapses removed from their brain, we know they are incapable of committing evil acts ever again. I don’t see how a system of incarceration can achieve that goal.’

The old bat smiled at the little nerd.

‘Quite right, Frederick. It is why we call them Taken, we’ve taken the criminal element out of their brains and made them productive citizens.’

She beamed a smile of victory at me and turned her back before I could give her the gesture I had in mind. She beckoned everyone forward with an imperious finger and strode off to the next part of the museum, labelled Transport.



‘Oh Cassandra, you do so love to be the centre of attention, don’t you?’

Millicent shook her head, jiggling judgemental blonde curls to condemn me as usual. She flashed her supercilious smile, it was a sham of course, designed to stop me from slapping her stupid face, she’d could then tell everyone I’d reacted unreasonably. Like last time. Cow.

‘Because I refuse to be like everyone else. I think all these morons probably had some of their synapses removed, at birth. Or perhaps everyone is so frightened of doing something wrong, and getting turned into a Taken, that they daren’t challenge the status quo.’

Sebastian sighed. It showed how he was changing. He’d once enjoyed being a rebel too, until Millicent got her hooks into him. Now they just stared at each other with dippy smiles all the time. I was starting to feel the same hatred for him as I already did for the porcelain doll-like mannequin next to him.

‘Come on Cass, even you have to admit the criminal type believe they can get away with their misdemeanours. That’s what makes them different to us.’

I gave them both a shrug and followed Mrs McFee, who was now droning on about how people had once travelled around in carbon-dependent vehicles that poisoned the environment. Of course, silly Milly couldn’t let the matter drop.

‘I’m proud of our society, aren’t you Seb? I mean, what kind of person would want to shut another person away for such a long time? It would make them so... anti-social. They’d never learn to fit in with other people. I suppose some people think that’s normal.’

I knew she was directing her insults at me, in a way that prevented any rational retaliation. And that smirk showed she knew it.

That was the point when I made the decision.

The hover-bus took us back to school, all the time I kept thinking about the times when I'd been ridiculed by Millicent and her army of mini-Millies. It was like they couldn't tolerate anyone being different, everyone had to conform to their standard of normal.

I decided to walk home, the day wasn't too hot for once, though winter wasn't far away so we could expect some cooler temperatures. It gave me time to think. I turned a corner, lost in thought and collided with a drooling Taken. Just my luck. It apologised and moved to let me pass then stared at me as I huffed and tutted my annoyance. I wasn't having some mindless imbecile judge me so I rounded on it.



'What's wrong with you, moron?'

Its blank eyes widened and shook its head in some sort of bewildered confusion. It apologised again.

'You ought to be locked up in one of those special places.' I struggled to remember the word.

'Prisons. Yeah, you ought to be locked up in a prison.'

The Taken babbled something incoherent, drooling down its chin in the process, before hurrying down the street, occasionally looking over its shoulder.

That was when I got the idea.

I hurried to school the next morning with greater enthusiasm than usual, my parents even commented on how I smiled while we had breakfast. I got there early and made my way to the old library. It wasn't used these days, why would you go to a specific place to get information when you could call it up on your personal display? It was dusty and dirty but I knew it held a variety of items that collectors valued; things like laptop and tablet computers. I'd read about there being a black market for these things, though I had no idea why, they were big, ugly and cumbersome. The thing was this though; no one cared about

them so they were piled up in a dark corner of a stockroom, which meant they wouldn't be missed.

I spent the next hour taking them out of the school building and hiding them so I could collect them later. It was going to take a few trips but it would be worth it. Oh, how it would be worth it.

I had to wash my hands because the things left so much dirt on them, before going to class. I'd come back that evening to carry out the next part of my plan.

Millicent lived in a street where trees used to grow, before they died from the heat. One bone-white skeleton stretched its branches to the side of her house and reached across to a first-floor balcony, I knew she used it sometimes when her parents had gone to bed and she went to parties. I waited until it was



dark and everyone would be asleep, placed the machines in a heavy-duty bag, with ropes threaded through its handles, climbed the tree and hauled up the bag. In it was a list of collectors who would be interested in the machines and a list of the prices each one would bring, making the purpose clear. I tied the bag to Millicent's windowsill so that it could be seen from the road, it might take a few days but I was certain someone would spot it eventually. Of course, Millicent would know nothing.

I got home feeling elated. I had implicated my nemesis in a crime. Millicent would become a Taken and she would no longer be able to humiliate and ridicule me, Sebastian wouldn't be drawn to her dubious charms either and I could regain his interest too.

It took two days.

School buzzed with the news. The police came into school, investigated the old stockroom where the machines had been kept and talked to the caretaker about the lack of security. Millicent was carted off and arrested for theft. Sebastian was shocked, heart-broken and I provided the friendship he needed.

More than anything, I felt good. With Millicent gone the back-biting ended, the bitchy comments stopped and life was good.

At least for a while. It was disappointing that the police eventually released Millicent because, apart from the bag of machines, there was no other evidence to implicate her. It didn't matter. The experience changed her, she was subdued, meek. By then Sebastian and I were firmly committed to each other. My plan had worked.

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It was a beautiful day. The sun shone in a perfectly blue sky and I walked along the street feeling relaxed and happy as I made my way to my new job. I always felt good these days, there was a peacefulness I hadn't known before and I was aware of a permanent smile on my lips.

I turned a corner and collided with a boy and a girl, holding hands and staring into each other's eyes. I apologised as they stared at me. Their faces looked familiar but I couldn't remember why.

The girl got rather agitated. She talked about crimes and fingerprints and how justice won in the end and why I deserved to be Taken.

I didn't understand what she was saying. It was such a beautiful day I continued walking to work. I wash dishes in a restaurant. It's such a fulfilling job. Perhaps that's why I'm so happy?

