

an excerpt from
THE BOOK OF KELL
by
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CHAPTER 1
THE FIELD TRIP

I hate field trips. That's exactly what I was thinking when the bus blew up.

I remember there was shouting. Then, a split second before the explosion, the crescendo of an intense high-pitched whine going from inaudible to ear-splitting in the blink of an eye. And then BOOM.

Hours before, they loaded the slouching, yawning, barely awake senior class--yours truly, eleven boys, eight girls--into a small bus for the ride up to the observatory. Field trips were everything that sucked about school, but worse. Crammed into a bus with my tormentors, I had nowhere to run.

It was fall. The beginning of my last year of school. I would've been long gone if I hadn't promised my Gran I would graduate. My mother had home-schooled me and Gabriel, but when she died during the Bad Times, Gran eventually decided we should go to school with the other surviving kids. I hated school. The only good thing about it was all the books the Settlement had in their library--fiction, nonfiction, poetry, reference, technical manuals. Almost a thousand books and I secretly vowed to read them all. But I hated being stuck inside a classroom, hated having to study things that no longer had any use or meaning in our world--if they ever did Before. But mostly I hated the other kids, who bullied and teased me like I was created for that very purpose.

That first day of school, my sister and I walked the five miles through the redwoods at dawn. I was thirteen and Gabriel was three years older. Side by side in the principal's office, Gabriel stood tall, doing all the talking as usual. I was silent, my eyes darting about the room, taking in the strangeness of it, a small, scruffy figure in my jeans and sweatshirt, baseball hat pulled low over my eyes.

"It's so nice to see you again, Gabriel," the principal told her. "Your parents were colleagues of mine in the psychology department Before. Fine people, both of them. And this must be, umm, your little brother, right? Kell, is it?" He squinted at the paper in his hand, then at me.

Gabriel looked down with the special smile she reserved just for me, her eyes questioning. She knew I was nervous about the whole school thing. I nodded once, just a quick up and down with my chin. She put her arm around my shoulders.

"Yes," she told the principal. "This is Kell."

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The stupid field trip. The adults were usually stingy with fuel, although there was plenty left in town if you had the patience and the stomach to retrieve it. One of the grownups had been an astronomy professor at the university Before. He was just another Settler now. But he convinced the council that our young lives would be immeasurably enriched by viewing a passing comet through the one working telescope at the old observatory.

Like we gave a shit about comets. Or Before, which we barely remembered. The senior class was in kindergarten when the Bad Times began. Some people were even starting to just call them The Times, like bad stuff only happened in the past, or in a story. Like if enough years went by, only good things would remain. It had been seven years since the last attack, five since the last big quake. That's a long time for most people.

Friday morning, we'd assembled at the school with our backpacks and sleeping bags. Mr. Giovanni was checking names off a list with a pencil bearing his bite marks. He taught English and history to all the high schoolers, plus he was the Aptitude counselor for the seniors.

"...eighteen...nineteen...now who am I missing? Oh. Yes. Kell."

He shot me a quick, unsure half-smile as grownups so often did and made a final check in his little red notebook.

"Let's go, campers!" he yelled enthusiastically to the completely unenthusiastic group. He would be our driver that brisk October day.

The retrofitted bus lurched and shuddered its way up to the observatory on a highway long overgrown with weeds. It was a slow drive in a low gear. The road was marred with cracks from earthquakes, potholes, fallen trees and rocks, not to mention the occasional rusted-out skeleton of a Before car. Dense forest, mostly redwoods and pines, covered the rest of the hillside. I knew. I'd been up there before with Gabriel on one of our scouting expeditions.

Hunter Cohen and one of his equally dim-witted buddies sat in front of me. As usual, no one sat next to me. God forbid. I stared out the window and hoped they would leave me alone, knowing they wouldn't.

"What's in the bag, faggot?" was how it started. My backpack was on the empty seat next to me. I had automatically, defensively hooked my arm through the strap when I sat down. I couldn't afford to lose what little I had. I kept staring out the window, ignoring them, while surreptitiously tightening my hold on the pack. If it came down to a tugging match, I was going to lose. Hunter outweighed me by at least fifty pounds and his pal was even bigger.

Ignoring them wasn't working. They were bored. And I was prey.

"Probably just his bra and panties," sneered the pal. "Fuckin' little fairy."

Hunter reached over the seat and grabbed my pack. I held on with all my strength, but it was only a matter of time. His buddy giggled as he watched me struggle.

"Fuck off," I snarled at them both.

"Fuck off," Hunter repeated in a high-pitched, taunting voice. His buddy thought that was hysterical.

I wished them both dead with all my heart.

My ignominious and inevitable defeat was averted only by the arrival of Hunter's sometime girlfriend, who came swaying down the aisle, trailing her fingertips over the backs of everyone's seats for balance. Her name was Elinor Eastman, but the kids called her East. She was beautiful but unfortunately was well aware of that. Taller than I by at least three inches. Luminous, pale skin. Glossy dark brown hair tumbling down past her shoulders, fine features, eyes an unusual shade of dark blue. Which didn't match the greenish shiner she had going on under her left eye. Maybe her stepfather had hit her. Maybe her oaf of a boyfriend.

Who, thankfully, let go of my backpack and the twisted fistful of my hoodie he had wadded up in his other hand. He shoved his buddy off the seat to make way for East. She glanced at me as she slid onto the padded bench, giving me just the glimmer of a nod. Or maybe I imagined that. Hunter didn't notice, being too busy running his sweaty hands all over her and leaning in for a big slurp of a kiss. Gross. I went back to staring out the window, wishing I was anywhere but there. Wishing the trip wouldn't last much longer.

Not knowing it was going to be the longest one of my life.