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Part 1 Family Business

"I don't know what's waiting for us when we die – something better, something worse. I only know I'm not ready to find out yet."

CHARLES DE LINT,
THE ONION GIRL

1

Benny Imura couldn't hold a job, so he took to killing.

It was the family business. He barely liked his family—and by family he meant his older brother, Tom—and he definitely didn't like the idea of "business." Or work. The only part of the deal that sounded like it might be fun was the actual killing.

He'd never done it before. Sure, he'd gone through a hundred simulations in gym class and in the Scouts, but they never let kids do any real killing. Not before they hit fifteen.

"Why not?" he asked his Scoutmaster, a fat guy named Feeney who used to be a TV weatherman back in the day. Benny was eleven at the time and obsessed with zombie hunting. "How come you don't let us whack some real zoms?"

"Because killing's the sort of thing you should learn from your folks," said Feeney.

"I don't have any folks," Benny countered. "My mom and dad died on First Night."

"Ouch. Sorry, Benny—I forgot. Point is, you *got* family of some kind, right?"

"I guess. I got 'I'm Mr. Freaking Perfect Tom Imura' for a brother, and I don't want to learn *anything* from him."

Feeney had stared at him. "Wow. I didn't know you were

related to him. He's your brother, huh? Well, there's your answer, kid. Nobody better to teach you the art of killing than a professional killer like Tom Imura." Feeney paused and licked his lips nervously. "I guess being his brother and all, you've seen him take down a lot of zoms."

"No," Benny said with huge annoyance. "He never lets me watch."

"Really? That's odd. Well, ask him when you turn thirteen."

Benny had asked on his thirteenth birthday, and Tom had said no. Again. It wasn't a discussion. Just "No."

That was more than two years ago, and now Benny was six weeks past his fifteenth birthday. He had four more weeks grace to find a paying job before town ordinance cut his rations by half. Benny hated being in that position, and if one more person gave him the "fifteen and free" speech, he was going to scream. He hated that as much as when people saw someone doing hard work and they said crap like, "Holy smokes, he's going at that like he's fifteen and out of food."

Like it was something to be happy about. Something to be proud of. Working your butt off for the rest of your life. Benny didn't see where the fun was in that. Okay, maybe it was marginally okay because it meant only half days of school from then on, but it still sucked.

His buddy Lou Chong said it was a sign of the growing cultural oppression that was driving postapocalyptic humanity toward acceptance of a new slave state. Benny had no freaking idea what Chong meant or if there was even meaning in anything he said. But he nodded agreement because the look on Chong's face always made it seem like he knew exactly what was what.

At home, before he even finished eating his dessert, Tom had said, "If I want to talk about you joining the family business, are you going to chew my head off? Again?"

Benny stared venomous death at Tom and said, very clearly and distinctly, "I. Don't. Want. To. Work. In. The. Family. Business."

"I'll take that as a 'no,' then."

"Don't you think it's a little late now to try and get me all excited about it? I asked you a zillion times to—"

"You asked me to take you out on kills."

"Right! And every time I did you—"

Tom cut him off. "There's a lot more to what I do, Benny."

"Yeah, there probably is, and maybe I would have thought the rest was something I could deal with, but you never let me see the cool stuff."

"There's nothing 'cool' about killing," Tom said sharply.

"There is when you're talking about killing zoms!" Benny fired back.

That stalled the conversation. Tom stalked out of the room and banged around the kitchen for a while, and Benny threw himself down on the couch.

Tom and Benny never talked about zombies. They had every reason to, but they never did. Benny couldn't understand it. He hated zoms. Everyone hated them, though with Benny it was a white-hot consuming hatred that went back to his very first memory. Because it *was* his first memory—a nightmare image that was there every night when he closed his eyes. It was an image that was seared into him, even though it was something he had seen as a tiny child.

Dad and Mom.

Mom screaming, running toward Tom, shoving a squirming Benny—all of eighteen months—into Tom's arms. Screaming and screaming. Telling him to run.

While the *thing* that had been Dad pushed its way through the bedroom door that Mom had tried to block with a chair and lamps and anything else she could find.

Benny remembered Mom screaming words, but the memory was so old and he had been so young that he didn't remember what any of them were. Maybe there were no words. Maybe it was just her screaming.

Benny remembered the wet heat on his face as Tom's tears fell on him as they climbed out of the bedroom window. They had lived in a ranch-style house. One story. The window emptied out into a yard that was pulsing with red and blue police lights. There were more shouts and screams. The neighbors. The cops. Maybe the army. Thinking back, Benny figured it was probably the army. And the constant popping of gunfire, near and far away.

But of all of it, Benny remembered a single last image. As Tom clutched him to his chest, Benny looked over his brother's shoulder at the bedroom window. Mom leaned out of the window, screaming at them as Dad's pale hands reached out of the shadows of the room and dragged her back out of sight.

That was Benny's oldest memory. If there had been older memories, then that image had burned them away. Because he had been so young the whole thing was little more than a collage of pictures and noises, but over the years Benny had burned his brain to reclaim each fragment, to assign meaning and sense to every scrap of what he could recall. Benny

remembered the hammering sound vibrating against his chest that was Tom's panicked heartbeat, and the long wail that was his own inarticulate cry for his mom and his dad.

He hated Tom for running away. He hated that Tom hadn't stayed and helped Mom. He hated what their dad had become on that First Night all those years ago. Just as he hated what Dad had turned Mom into.

In his mind they were no longer Mom and Dad. They were the *things* that had killed them. Zoms. And he hated them with an intensity that made the sun feel cold and small.

"Dude, what is it with you and zoms?" Chong once asked him. "You act like the zoms have a personal grudge against you."

"What, I'm supposed to have fuzzy bunny feelings for them?" Benny had snapped back.

"No," Chong had conceded, "but a little perspective would be nice. I mean . . . everybody hates zoms."

"You don't."

Chong had shrugged his bony shoulders and his dark eyes had darted away. "Everybody hates zoms."

The way Benny saw it, when your first memory was of zombies killing your parents, then you had a license to hate them as much as you wanted. He tried to explain that to Chong, but his friend wouldn't be drawn back into the conversation.

A few years ago, when Benny found out that Tom was a zombie hunter, he hadn't been proud of his brother. As far as he was concerned, if Tom really had what it took to be a zombie hunter, he'd have had the guts to help Mom. Instead, Tom had run away and left Mom to die. To become one of *them.*

Tom came back into the living room, looked at the

remains of the dessert on the table, then looked at Benny on the couch.

"The offer still stands," he said. "If you want to do what I do, then I'll take you on as an apprentice. I'll sign the papers so you can still get full rations."

Benny gave him a long, withering stare.

"I'd rather be eaten by zoms than have you as my boss," Benny said.

Tom sighed, turned, and trudged upstairs. After that they didn't talk to each other for days.