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Freak the Mighty

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The Unvanquished Truth 1

I never had a brain until Freak came along and let me borrow his for a while, and that's the truth, the whole truth. The unvanquished truth, is how Freak would say it, and for a long time it was him who did the talking. Except I had a way of saying things with my fists and my feet even before we became Freak the Mighty, slaying dragons and fools and walking high above the world.

Called me Kicker for a time – this was day care, the year Gram and Grim took me over – and I had a thing about booting anyone who dared to touch me. Because they were *always* trying to throw a hug on me, like it was a medicine I needed.

Gram and Grim, bless their pointed little heads, they're my mother's people, *her* parents, and they figured whoa! better put this little critter with other

little critters his own age, maybe it will improve his temper.

Yeah, right! Instead, what happened, I invented games like kick-boxing and kick-knees and kick-faces and kick-teachers, and kick-the-other-little-day-care-critters, because I knew what a rotten lie that hug stuff was. Oh, I *knew*.

That's when I got my first look at Freak, that year of the phoney hugs. He didn't look so different back then, we were all of us pretty small, right? But he wasn't in the playroom with us every day, just now and then he'd show up. Looking sort of fierce is how I remember him. Except later it was Freak himself who taught me that remembering is a great invention of the mind, and if you try hard enough you can remember anything, whether it really happened or not.

So maybe he wasn't really all *that* fierce in day care, except I'm pretty sure he did hit a kid with his crutch once, whacked the little brat pretty good. And for some reason little Kicker never got around to kicking little Freak.

Maybe it was those crutches kept me from lashing out at him, man those crutches were cool. I wanted a pair for myself. And when little Freak showed up one day with these shiny braces strapped

to his crooked legs, metal tubes right up to his hips, why those were even *more* cool than crutches.

"I'm Robot Man," little Freak would go, making these weird robot noises as he humped himself around the playground. *Rrrr. . .rrr. . .rrr. . .*like he had robot motors inside his legs, going *rrrrr. . .rrrr . . .rrrr,* and this look, like don't mess with me, man, maybe I got a laser cannon hidden inside these leg braces, smoke a hole right through you. No question, Freak was hooked on robots even back then, this little guy two feet tall, and already he knew what he wanted.

Then for a long time I never saw Freak any more, one day he just never came back to day care, and the next thing I remember I'm like in the third grade or something and I catch a glimpse of this yellow-haired kid scowling at me from one of those cripple vans. Man, they were death-ray eyes, and I think, hey, that's him, the robot boy, and it was like whoa! because I'd forgotten all about him, day care was a blank place in my head, and nobody had called me Kicker for a long time.

Mad Max they were calling me, or Max Factor, or this one butthead in L.D. class called me Maxi Pad, until I persuaded him otherwise. Gram and Grim always called me Maxwell, though, which is

supposed to be my real name, and sometimes I hated that worst of all. Maxwell, ugh.

Grim out in the kitchen one night, after supper whispering to Gram had she noticed how much Maxwell was getting to look like *Him*? Which is the way he always talked about my father, who has married his dear departed daughter and produced, eek eek, Maxwell. Grim never says my father's name, just *Him*, like his name is too scary to say.

It's more than just the way Maxwell resembles him, Grim says that night in the kitchen, the boy is *like* him, we'd better watch out, you never know what he might do while we're sleeping. Like his father did. And Gram right away shushes him and says don't ever say that, because little pictures have big ears, which makes me run to the mirror to see if it is my ears made me look like *Him*.

What a butthead, huh?

Well, I *was* a butthead, because like I said, I never had a brain until Freak moved down the street. The summer before eighth grade, right? That's the summer I grew so fast that Grim said we'd best let the boy go barefoot, he's exploding out of his shoes. That barefoot summer when I fell down a lot, and the weirdo robot boy with his white-yellow hair and his weird fierce eyes moved into the duplex down

the block with his beautiful brown-haired mum, the Fair Gwen of Air.

Only a falling-down goon would think that was her real name, right?

Like I said.

Are you paying attention here? Because you don't even know yet how we got to be Freak the Mighty. Which was pretty cool, even if I do say so myself.

2 Up From the Down Under



That summer, let's see, I'm still living in the basement, my own private down under, in the little room Grim built for me there. Glued up this cheap panelling, right? It sort of buckles away from the concrete cellar walls, a regular ripple effect, but do I complain about the crummy panelling, or the rug that smells like low tide? I do not. Because I *like* it in the down under, got the place all to myself and no fear of Gram sticking her head in the door and saying Maxwell dear, what *are* you doing?

Not that I ever *do* much of anything. Grim has it fixed in his head I'm at a dangerous age and they need to keep me under observation. Like I might make bombs or start a fire. Or whack out the local pets with my trusty slingshot or whatever – except I never *had* a slingshot, it was Grim who had one

when he was my age. The proof is right there in the family photo album. You can see this blurry little miniature Grim with no front teeth, grinning at the camera and yanking back on his prehistoric slingshot. Good for whacking mastodons, probably. "Just proper targets," Grim says, closing up the photo album, end of discussion. Like, oops, better hide the evidence. Don't want to give the dangerous boy any ideas.

Not that I *have* any ideas. My brain is vacant, okay? I'm just this critter hiding out in the basement, drooling in my comic books or whatever. All right, I never actually *drool*, but you get the picture.

Anyhow, this is the first day of July, already counting down for the Fourth and wondering where I can get an M80, which is supposed to have the explosive power of a quarter stick of dynamite or something, and when it goes off your heart thuds to a stop for a microsecond, *wham*. Which is probably what Grim is afraid of, eek eek, Maxwell armed with dynamite.

So finally I get bored in the down under and I'm hanging out in the so-called back yard, your basic chunk of chain-link heaven. Grim keeps this crummy little mower in the shed, but what's the point of mowing dirt, right? Okay, I'm out there messing around and that's when I see the moving

van. Not your mainstream, nationwide, brand-name mover, either, just some cheapo local outfit. These big bearded dudes in their sweaty undershirts lugging stuff into the duplex half that's been vacant since last Christmas, when the dope fiend who lived there finally got busted.

At first I'm thinking the dope fiend is back, he's out of jail or whatever, and he's moving his stuff back in. Then I see the Fair Gwen. Not that I knew her name, that was a little while later. At first she's a glimpse, caught her going between the van and the front door, talking to the beards. I'm thinking, *hey I know her,* and then I'm thinking, *no way, butthead, no way you'd know a female that beautiful.*

Because she looks like some kind of movie star. Wearing these old jeans and a baggy T-shirt, and her long hair is tied back and she's probably sweating, but she *still* looks like a movie star. Like she has this glow, a secret spotlight that follows her around and makes her eyes light up.

And I'm thinking, well *this* improves the old neighbourhood. You're thinking, yeah right, the goon is barely out of seventh grade, who does he think he is? All I'm saying, the Fair Gwen had star quality, and even a total moron can see it. And the

reason she looked familiar is, I must have seen her bringing Freak to day care, way back in the dark ages, because the next thing I notice is this crippled-up yellow-haired midget kid strutting around the sidewalk, giving orders to the beards.

He's going: "Hey you, Doofus! Yeah, you with the hairy face, take it easy with that box. That box contains a computer, you know what a computer is?"

I can't believe it. By then I'm sneaking along the street to see what's going on, and there's this weird-looking dude, he's got a normal-sized head, but the rest of him is shorter than a yardstick and kind of twisted in a way that means he can't stand up straight and makes his chest puff out, and he's waving his crutches around and yelling up at the movers.

"Hey, Gwen," one of the beards says, "can't you give this kid a pill or something? He's driving us nuts."

So Gwen comes out of the house and pushes the hair out of her big brown eyes and she goes, "Kevin, go play in the back yard, okay?"

"But my computer."

"Your computer is fine. Leave the men alone. They'll be done soon and then we can have lunch."

By this time I'm hunkering along in front of the place, trying to maintain a casual attitude, except

like I said my feet are going wild that year and I keep tripping over everything. Cracks in the sidewalk, ants on the sidewalk, shadows, anything.

Then the strange little dude jerks himself around and he catches sight of me and he lifts a crutch and points it up at my heart and he goes, "Identify yourself, earthling."

I'm busy keeping my feet from tripping and don't get that he means me.

"I said identify yourself, earthling, or suffer the consequences."

I'm like, what? And before I can decide whether or not to tell him my name, or *which* name, because by now I recognize him as the weird little robot kid from day care and maybe he remembers me as Kicker, anyhow before I can say a word he pulls the trigger on that crutch and makes a weapon noise, and he goes, "Then die, earthling, die!"

I motor out of there without saying a word. Because I'm pretty sure he really means it. The way he points that crutch is only part of it. You have to see the look in his eye. Man, that little dude really hates me.

He *wants* me to die.