

KILLER PIZZA
THE SLICE

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FEIWEL AND FRIENDS
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PROLOGUE: ESCAPE

A girl—backlit by a three-quarter moon, low in the cloudless sky—raced across a barren, fallow field. Before reaching the dense forest that surrounded the field, the girl stopped and looked back in the direction she had just traveled. A few precious moments ticked by, then the girl turned and continued on her way. In no time at all, she was swallowed up by the forest.

And the darkness.

Later, two men appeared in the field. The moon's harsh, brittle light clearly illuminated them as they came across the field. Dressed in plain, old-fashioned clothes, they could have stepped right out of the pages of history. Say, the American Midwest in the early 1900s. The men's contemporary jewelry and tattoos—a jarring and somewhat disturbing fashion statement—spoiled the comparison, however.

The lead man, distinguished by a tattoo in the shape of

a sideways cross on his forehead, stopped halfway across the field, knelt, and studied the ground. Footprints. Clearly visible in the dirt. The man nodded at the sight, stood, and buttoned his coat against the night air. His colleague did the same. Then the two went after the girl.



The tall, skeletal-looking man sat in a wooden rocking chair, staring at the flames in a nearby stone fireplace. The shadows cast by the flames, flickering across the man's hollowed-out face, resembled restless spirits, spirits that wanted to be anywhere else but this place, this room.

Outside, back clouds had turned day to twilight. Rain attacked the windows. Wind blew through the eaves, causing an odd, groaning sound. When there was a knock on the door, muffled by the sounds of the storm, the Tall Man didn't answer right away. Then, in an odd accent impossible to trace, he said, "Come in."

The strangely shaped door, much wider than a typical door, opened, and the two men who had gone after the girl entered. They hesitated for a moment, then crossed the room. They stood quietly as the Tall Man continued to rock in his chair. Finally, the rocking chair ceased its back and forth movements.

"We followed her tracks for over a hundred miles, sir. To the nearest town. We believe she has taken a south-

western route.” It was the man with the cross tattoo on his forehead who spoke, his quirky accent even stronger than the Tall Man’s.

The Tall Man nodded slowly. “A southwestern route . . .”

“Yes, sir.”

“So what you’re saying is, after several days tracking the girl, all you have brought back to me is the news she has taken a southwestern route.”

“When the rain came, it was very difficult—”

“In other words . . . you allowed a child, a mere child, to elude you.”

A heavy silence fell over the room. The two men shifted uneasily. When the Tall Man slowly turned in his chair, he wasn’t looking at the men, but rather something behind them. The nod he gave was barely perceptible.

What happened next showed why it was not advisable to get on the Tall Man’s bad side. Exactly *what* happened . . . well, it defied any logical explanation. The man with the forehead tattoo suddenly went rigid. His mouth opened wide, but no scream emerged. The other man stumbled back against the wall, his eyes locked on the horrific sight in front of him.

His partner’s body was actually crumpling inward! It was as though every ounce of moisture was being

sucked from his insides! But what could be causing this hideous attack? Other than the three men, no other living thing was visible in the room.

Within a minute, the man's body resembled a mummy. A mummy with hollow eye sockets, earrings dangling from wrinkled earlobes, and a shriveled-to-half-size tattoo on its forehead. When the body fell forward and hit the floor, the Tall Man studied it briefly, as though it were a laboratory specimen of some sort, then turned his attention to the other man.

"You may go."

The man looked like he didn't believe what the Tall Man had just told him. He glanced wildly in the direction of his deceased colleague, then back at the Tall Man.

"Go. Before I change my mind."

The man didn't need to be told a third time. He hurried from the room and pulled the door firmly shut behind him as he exited.

The Tall Man stood and walked closer to the fire. Holding out his hands to the heat, he shook his head sadly. "You know what they say, Lemuri. If you want something done, do it yourself."

Standing a moment longer by the fire, warming himself for the long journey ahead, the man turned and walked to a nearby hat stand. He lifted a heavy winter

coat from the stand and shrugged it on. Over this, he put a long rain slicker. A wide-brimmed hat completed the Tall Man's travel outfit. Walking to the door, the man opened it and stood to one side, as though waiting for something . . . or someone.

Suddenly, a shadow moved across the room. Actually, it was more like the outline of a moving figure. The mysterious form appeared to have the supernatural ability to blend in with its surroundings!

When the monstrous, chameleon-like shape moved through the open doorway—its wide, hulking profile solving the mystery of the oddly shaped door—a fierce gust of wind blew into the room, accompanied by swirling leaves and a heavy dose of rain. The Tall Man followed his invisible companion out of the room and pulled the door shut behind him, leaving a quiet and serene room in his wake.

Whoever this girl was that the Tall Man was so intent on tracking down, it was clear she had better run as fast as her legs could carry her. The man and his bloodthirsty sidekick were obviously forces to be reckoned with.

And a million miles from ordinary.



**PART ONE:
MONSTROPOLIS**



“I give up. This is totally insane.”

Jostled by waves of people walking briskly in dozens of directions, Toby Magill looked hopelessly lost. His friend Strobe, a tall teen wearing a black watch cap, regarded the teeming crowd with a bemused expression. “I think we need to go over there. Past that sign and down those stairs.”

“We just came *up* those stairs.”

“No, we didn’t.”

“Yes, we did.”

“You sure?”

“That’s the only thing I am sure of.”

“In that case . . . this is totally insane!”

“Take it easy, you two. We can figure this out.”

That’s exactly what Annabel Oshiro was trying to do . . . figure out the New York subway system with only a map as her guide. As Annabel studied her map, Toby

and Strobe continued to take in the intense scene that surrounded them. Compared to the trio's Ohio suburban community of Hidden Hills, New York City was like a rocket blast of sound and movement.

Hundreds of people navigated the huge underground area that was an intersection for dozens of subway destinations. A bewildering number of overhead signs pointed the various ways to red, blue, green, and yellow subway lines, not to mention subway trains identified by numerous numbers and letters . . . a unique underground language. To the uninitiated, it was like standing inside a gigantic 3-D puzzle that simply didn't fit together.

"It would have made a lot more sense for the big guy to send someone to pick us up at the airport," Strobe said, obviously annoyed at this slight.

Annabel looked up from her map, nodded when she found the sign she was looking for, then slid her map into a side pocket of her backpack. "I think Harvey means this as a test, Strobe. He wants us to figure out how to get to KP headquarters on our own. Which is *this* way."

"I'm done with tests," Strobe declared as he followed Annabel down a narrow stairway toward a subway platform teeming with people. "We passed our test. A little respect is in order here."

It had been almost four months since Annabel, Toby, and Strobe met when they began working at Killer Pizza, Hidden Hills' newest pizza place. What they discovered not long after the grand opening was that the Killer Pizza franchise offered something much more than award-winning pizzas.

“Just because we killed an ugly-as-sin monster, doesn't mean we're experts,” Toby pointed out. “There're always gonna be more tests to pass.”

It was after a typically busy day in the Killer Pizza kitchen that Harvey P. Major III, the owner of KP, had revealed to an astonished Toby, Annabel, and Strobe that his pizza chain was actually a front—a legitimate front, with award-winning pizzas and franchises all over the world—that put all of its profits into an underground organization of monster hunters. Even though Annabel and Toby were only fourteen—Strobe, fifteen—Harvey had asked the still-disbelieving trio to try out for his elite group.

“That's our train,” Annabel called out, quickly bounding down the stairs. The trio pushed their way into the rush-hour horde that was cramming into the subway car. They made it inside just as the doors closed. Toby, the last one in, was jolted when the doors slammed into his backpack. He yanked away from the doors to free himself,

then flew across the aisle and landed in the lap of a passenger dressed in a smartly tailored business suit.

“Sorry!” Toby said, pushing himself away from the startled woman. When the train jerked forward and accelerated down the track, Toby lost his balance and toppled over. Fortunately, Strobe was there to catch the flailing teen before he hit the floor.

“Please excuse the boy,” Strobe told the woman with a smile. “This is his first trip to New York.” Tersely readjusting her crumpled newspaper, the woman pointedly ignored Strobe. After pulling Toby away from the woman and down the aisle of the crowded subway car, Strobe indicated an overhead bar. “Grab hold of that, will you. And try not to embarrass us for the rest of the ride.”

“The doors attacked me,” Toby countered good-naturedly. “You saw it.”

Standing nearby, Annabel shook her head in exasperation. “I can’t take you two anywhere. I swear.”

“That may be true, but I ask you this,” Strobe said. “Where would you be without us, huh?”

The subway train plunged into a dark tunnel, leaving the well-lit platform behind. Hurtling through the endless night of the tunnel on the swaying, jerking train, Toby found himself thinking about Strobe’s question, but from his point of view. Where would *he* be without

Strobe and Annabel? Toby looked around the packed subway car. Not here, in New York City, that's for sure.

Fact was, Toby's life had been rather mundane before he started working at the take-out pizza place located on a Hidden Hills dead-end street. Since his first day at Killer Pizza, however, life had become tons more interesting. And maybe a bit too exciting at times.

The train suddenly entered another brightly lit platform area.

"This is our exit, guys," Annabel announced.

Toby threw himself into the middle of the competing mobs of people jostling to get on and off the subway. A veteran now of three subway car departures since arriving in New York, Toby was actually starting to enjoy what felt like a thirty-second extreme-sports event. The object? Get on or off the subway car before the doors close!

Energetically elbowing his way toward the beckoning platform, Toby made it just as the doors closed behind him, this time avoiding the subway-door backpack grab. Toby nodded in satisfaction as he located his KP partners on the crowded platform. He was already getting better at navigating the wild energy that NYC was famous for.

"From here," Annabel was saying as Toby approached, her eyes locked on her all-important subway map, "we

need to get to the Fifty-first Street downtown platform of the green line and . . .”

“Annabel?” Strobe interrupted. “Just lead the way, okay?”

“What a surprise, Strobe. You’re actually willing to let me lead. A little advice? Keep me in sight or you just might get lost.” Annabel gave Strobe a competitive nudge, then pushed her way through the crowd.



Toby smiled when he caught sight of an unusual triangular high-rise building through the trees. “Hey, check it out, guys. How cool is Killer Pizza’s headquarters?”

From a certain angle, New York’s Flatiron Building looked like a huge ship’s bow, aiming for Madison Square Park. Crisscrossing the park, the trio was on a collision course with the New York landmark.

“Bet you didn’t know it’s considered one of the first skyscrapers ever built,” Toby revealed. “It was finished in 1902—”

“Looks like where Peter Parker works in the Spider-Man movies,” Annabel observed.

“It is. It’s one of the most recognizable buildings in the city, and not just because of the Spider-Man movies. Know how it got its name? It’s built on a lot that resembles a clothing iron.”

“I think somebody did a little research for this trip.”

“You bet I did. I mean, how exciting is this?”

“It’s not that exciting,” Strobe said, playing it cool, as usual. “You obviously don’t get out much, do you, Tobe.”

“Compared to you, no, of course not. You know what? I can’t wait to see KP’s culinary operations.”

“Well, you’re gonna have to wait,” Strobe shot back. “We’re not here to learn how to make better pizzas, after all.”

That’s exactly what the trio’s parents thought their children were doing in New York. Attending a weekend training session for “promising young employees” of Killer Pizza. But the real purpose of the trip was an intensive tour of KP’s underground Monster Combat Officer headquarters.

Emerging from the park, the trio joined a crowd that was waiting for the light to turn at a nearby crosswalk. Then they walked across Broadway to the epicenter of Killer Pizza’s worldwide operations.

2

The lobby of the Flatiron Building gave no indication of what went on inside its walls. Toby and Strobe strolled around the perimeter of the lobby, checking out the place as Annabel walked over to a security guard sitting behind a kiosk.

“Hi. I’m Annabel Oshiro, with Toby Magill and Strobe . . .” Annabel caught herself. Nicknames wouldn’t do at KP headquarters. “Gordon Tibbles. We’re here to see Harvey Major.”

The guard gave Annabel a deadpan once-over, then pointed to an area just above and behind his kiosk. “Look up there, please.”

“Excuse me?”

“Up there.”

Annabel looked up in the direction indicated by the guard.

“Your companions need to do the same,” the guard said.

“Hey, guys. Over here.”

By the time Toby and Strobe had gotten their pictures taken by the phantom camera above the kiosk, the guard had put a call into Harvey’s office. “Seventh floor,” the guard said, pointing to the nearby elevators. “Someone will be there to meet you.”

It was Harvey Major III himself waiting for the trio when the elevator doors opened onto the seventh-floor landing. At first glance, Harvey looked very boyish, certainly younger than his twenty-one years. But on closer examination, one could see that he had the eyes of a much older man, eyes that had seen a lot in a relatively short amount of time. Harvey never smiled much, but the trio noticed a slight uptick at the corner of his mouth when they stepped from the elevator.

“Welcome to New York,” Harvey said, shaking hands with each of his employees.

“What are we seeing first, Chief?” Strobe asked.

“Unfortunately, your tour has to be postponed. Temporarily.”

“Why’s that?” Annabel asked.

Harvey walked to another elevator and pressed the button. “There’s something I need you to do for me.”

“Like a job?” Strobe was definitely up for anything resembling a job. Very much the gung ho soldier when it came to the smell of battle—of the monster

variety—Strobe had been disappointed in the recent lack of supernatural activity back in Hidden Hills.

“Actually, it is,” Harvey confirmed. “I need you to make a pickup for me.”

“Pickup?” Toby asked. “What are we pickin’ up?”

The elevator doors opened, and the trio followed Harvey into the elevator. “A dekayi is coming in from the monster side,” Harvey revealed as the doors closed and the elevator started to move slowly downward.

The trio had studied for, and passed, an examination covering all types of creatures of the night, the final step to becoming official Monster Combat Officers, but they had never heard of a dekayi. As for “coming in from the monster side,” they could only guess what that meant.

“It’s a division we have here,” Harvey explained. “MPP. Monster Protection Program.”

“You’re kidding me,” Strobe said.

“No.”

“You never told us anything about a monster protection program.” Strobe didn’t like how secretive Harvey could be about his operation.

“There was never any need to. Until now.”

“Do a lot of monsters come in from the monster side?” Annabel asked.

“Not in droves. But it’s still a very important division

here at Killer Pizza. Mostly they're monsters we've captured. Remember, a lot of our enemies don't start out as enemies. They were humans bitten by any number of creatures. But in this case, with the dekayi, contact was made with one of our Canadian MPP specialists. Our agent was on her way to New York with her charge, when . . .”

The elevator abruptly shuddered to a stop. The doors slowly opened. Harvey lead the trio out of the elevator and down a deserted basement hallway.

“When what?” Toby asked.

“As it turned out, the dekayi had been followed by some of her people. There was a skirmish near the Canadian-American border. My person was injured. She's in the hospital. The dekayi managed to escape and has been on her own ever since.”

“How is your agent doing?” Annabel asked.

“Time will tell. At present she's still in intensive care.”

The foursome fell silent after this somber news. They were approaching a large metal door at the end of the hall when Strobe broke the lull in the conversation. “What makes you think this dekayi defector can be trusted?”

“Excellent point. One always has to be wary of a deserter from the other side. Which is why, after making

contact with this one, you will take her to an apartment where she'll stay until we can debrief her. We need to be absolutely certain the flight from her community is not just a ruse to gather information on our organization. Until then, she'll be kept far away from KP headquarters."

Arriving at the end of the hall, Harvey slid a plastic card through a slot next to the metal door and pushed his way into a large gym. Strobe smiled at the sight. The trio's secret training center in the basement beneath the Killer Pizza building back in Hidden Hills was more than adequate, but it was nothing compared to this. A full-size basketball court took up one half of the large room. The other half was filled with a maze of sleek-looking exercise machines.

"Now I know what it feels like coming to the bigs after playing in the minors," Strobe said. "There is definitely money in pizza, isn't there."

"Let me put it this way," Harvey replied. "The man who owns one of my rival pizza chains built an entire university in Florida. I built . . . this." Harvey stared across the gym with an indecipherable look in his eyes. Then he turned and led the trio through an open doorway and into a locker room that was easily ten times the size of the one back in Hidden Hills. As in the gym, there were no people in sight.