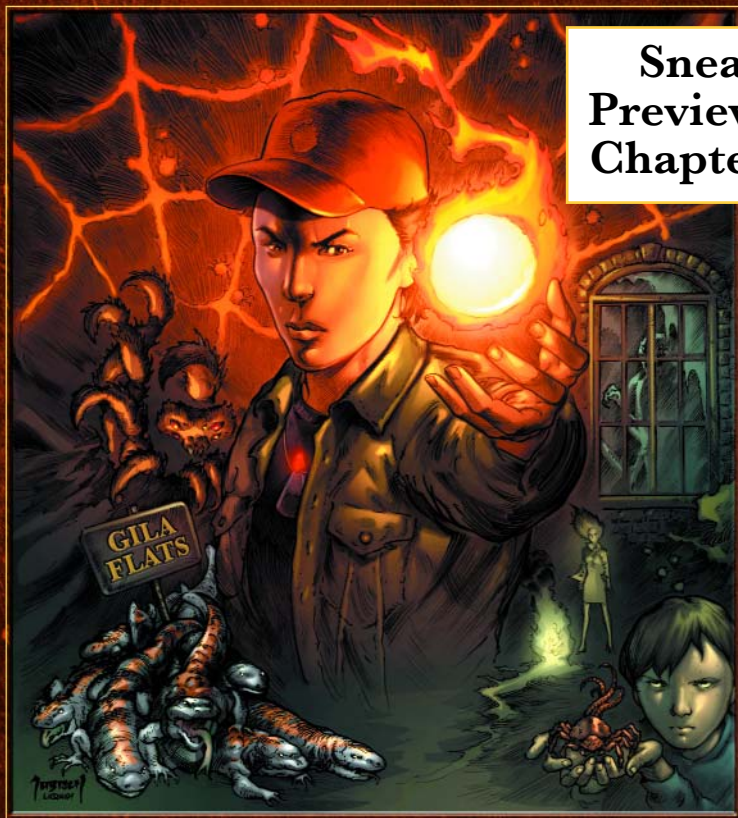


Heir to FIRE

Sneak
Preview of
Chapter 3!



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Donut's second favorite activity



Chapter Three

Discoveries, strange and frightening

“**Y**ou think they'll have food there?” Donut asked as he bounded along beside Ryan down the dark streets of the residential neighborhood. “I mean, they'll probably have hamburgers, but I wonder if they'll have desserts?”

Donut was Ryan's oldest friend, one of the few kids who wasn't bothered by the fact that Ryan didn't talk much. In fact, Donut seemed to like the fact that Ryan's words were spare, because it meant Donut could talk even more.





“Maybe instead of hamburgers they’ll have sushi. I could really go for some sushi,” Donut continued as he bobbed a plastic jar in his hands.

Like Ryan, Donut didn't make a lot of friends. His non-stop yammering could be irritating, and he was an expert on many subjects, some of which people found creepy. But his favorite subject was food. Even before Ryan's growth spurt Donut was several inches shorter, but he carried slightly more weight. This gave him a very round torso that some people called stocky.

“I'm pretty sure they won't have sushi,” Ryan said.

A full moon shone down as they walked. The jar Donut carried was a former peanut butter canister, now completely cleaned out. Donut had poked



a few holes in the lid and put some handfuls of grass inside.

If Ryan were of a mind to think about it, it would be obvious that they were engaging in Donut's second-favorite activity: collecting bugs. But he was barely paying attention to his friend. All he could think about was Corrine's brown eyes and the way it sounded when she said his name earlier, but those queasy feelings of happiness that swirled in his stomach gradually gave way to another feeling.

Ryan knew the feeling well as the hairs on the back of his neck started to stand on end. Without him realizing it, Donut had led him to the far south end of the neighborhood where the old Oobakka ranch house stood.





The house was a large, two-story structure that had been abandoned for as long as Ryan could remember. During the day, it was a dusty, white structure, faded by decades spent in the sun. Somehow, in the dark of night, the house always looked dark gray, almost black.

There were stories in the neighborhood that something terrible had happened there once. A whole family had died under mysterious circumstances. Kids at school claimed that when the police found them, each member of the family had been wrapped up in spider webs and all their blood had sucked out.

Whenever Ryan had to pass by the house, he wanted to run away as fast as he could. Even though his parents told him the stories weren't true,



some part of him believed that they might be.

“W-w-we should turn around,” Ryan stammered, hoping Donut couldn't hear how scared he was.

“Don't be a chicken-butt. This is what I wanted to show you.”

Donut put his hands on Ryan's back and pushed him forward towards the house. Ryan resisted at first, pushing back with his legs. As his muscles strained against his heavy friend, Ryan remembered what his father often told him. “Most times fear hurts you more than the thing you're afraid of.”

“All right,” he told Donut, annoyed by his friend's insistence. He walked forward on his own.

The two boys scurried behind a stand of thorn bushes at the edge of the Oobakka property.





HEIR TO FIRE

The bushes were sometimes called crucifixion thorns, and to Ryan they seemed to claw at the full moon like bony hands.

Donut studied the bushes, eyebrows furrowed, a scowl of concentration on his face. He held his plastic jar in one hand and the lid in the other as he studied the bush. Ryan couldn't help thinking that the look of concentration wasn't much different than what he saw on Kirby's face when the cat spotted a nearby bird.

Suddenly Donut sprung his trap, his chubby arms coming together, closing the jar and lid around a leaf on the tree. "Gotcha!"

Donut held the jar up to the moonlight and studied his prize. It was a large spider, the likes of which Ryan had never seen before. It was bigger

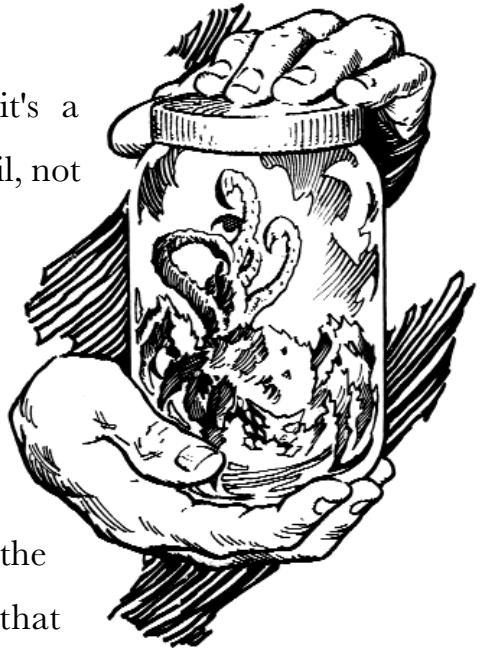


than most spiders, perhaps four inches long from front leg to back, with a sandy, almost flesh-colored body.

“What kind is it?” Ryan asked.

“I’m convinced it’s a new species. Note the tail, not unheard of in the arachnid class, but to have a cluster like this is very unusual,”

Donut said in a scholarly voice, pointing out the creature’s weird tail that split into four or five barbed ends. Donut kept talking, but all Ryan could think





about were the stories of the Oobakka family wrapped in webbing. He began to wonder if there were other spiders on that bush.

As fear welled up inside Ryan, he failed to notice that Donut had abruptly stopped talking. Ryan looked at his friend who stared at the Oobakka house, his bottom lip trembling. “R-R-Ryan,” Donut stammered quietly.

Ryan followed Donut's gaze to the house. Pinpricks of shock rippled through his body again as he saw a dark figure standing by one of the house's windows, illuminated only by the moonlight. The figure was tall and slender and hunched over, like a skinny old man with bone disease. As the person walked in front of the window the boys saw his bony, slender fingers with long nails that he kept



curled in front of him like a praying mantis.

Then the figure reached down with those hands and lifted something off the floor. Ryan wasn't sure what it was at first but soon recognized the small, furry shape as a house cat. The strange old man lifted the cat up above his head and the cat began to moan the horrible sound that it makes when it is terrified, like a baby in distress.

Donut clutched Ryan's arm so hard that both boys fell over as the cat's shrieking reached its peak and suddenly stopped. Through the branches, Ryan could see that the dark figure had disappeared from the window.

“Omigosh, omigosh, omigosh,” Donut kept repeating as the boys lay flat on the ground.

It was only from this low vantage point that





Ryan realized the boys weren't alone. In the dust just a few feet from his nose was the fat, shiny, black and red tail of a Gila Monster.

The lizard turned its thick head back and hissed, flicking his black, forked tongue at the boys and sending Donut running into the street, screaming. But Ryan was too scared to move.

The town of Gila Flats was named for these intimidating creatures, which lived in the nearby desert. Ryan had seen one or two before, but it was rare to find them in town like this. Although they had a venomous bite, they were very shy and usually stayed away from people. As the lizard turned and continued walking, Ryan could see that it was not the only Gila Monster in the yard. There were perhaps a dozen such reptiles, some twice as big as



the first, pacing restlessly in front of the house, looking towards that window, and hissing their eerie hiss.

Ryan felt that same dizzy, disoriented feeling that he had felt when he stumbled across the street to meet Corrine. Suddenly the dry crucifixion thorn bush burst into flames right in front of him, illuminating the eerie march of reptiles.

As he looked around, he saw many more Gila Monsters walking towards the Oobakka house. Beyond them, stocky Donut ran as fast as his thick legs could carry him, and Ryan decided his friend had the right idea as he got up and ran away from the strange procession.

