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RUNNING WITH THE DEMON

THE WORD & THE VOID

Running with the Demon

Book 1 of The Word & Void

By Terry Brooks

Prologue

He stands alone in the center of another of America's burned-out towns, but he has been to this one before. Even in their ruined, blackened condition, the buildings that surround him are recognizable. The streets of the intersection in which he finds himself stretch away in windswept concrete ribbons that dwindle and fade into the horizon-south to the bridge that spans the river, north to the parched flats of what were once cornfields, east toward the remains of Reagan's hometown, and west to the Mississippi and the Great Plains. A street sign, bent and weathered, confirms that he stands at the corner of First Avenue and Third Street. The town is eight blocks square, two blocks in any direction from where he stands, petering out afterward in dribs and drabs of homes that have been converted to real-estate offices and repair shops or simply leveled to provide parking. Farther out lie the abandoned ruins of two supermarkets and the mall, and down along the riverbank he can see the broken-down stacks and rusted-out corrugated roofs of what is left of the steel mill.

He looks around slowly, making sure he is in the right place, because it has been a long time. The sky is clouded and dark. Rain threatens and will probably fall before night. Although it is noon, the light is so pale that it seems more like dusk. The air and the earth are washed clean of color. Buildings, streets, abandoned vehicles, trash, and sky are a uniform shade of gray, the paint running from one into the other until nothing remains but shadows and light to differentiate any of it. In the silence, the wind moans softly as it rises off the river and whips down the empty streets. Twigs, leaves, and debris skitter along the concrete. Windows gape dark and hollow where the plate glass has been broken out. Doors hang open and sag. Smears of black ash and soot stain the walls where fires have burned away the wood and plastic veneer of the offices and shops. Cars hunker down on flattened tires and bare axles, stripped of everything useful, abandoned shells turning slowly to rust.

The man looks the town over as he would a corpse, remembering when it was still vital.

A pack of dogs comes out of one of the buildings. There are maybe ten of them, lean and hungry, quick-eyed and suspicious. They study him momentarily before moving on. They want nothing to do with him. He watches them disappear around the corner of a building, and he begins to

walk. He moves east toward the park, even though he knows what he will find. He passes the bank, the paint store, the fabric shop, Al's Bar, and a parking lot, and stops at Josie 's. The sign still hangs over the entry; the enamel is faded and broken, but the name is recognizable. He walks over and peers inside. The furniture and pastry cases are all smashed, the cooking equipment broken, and the leather banquettes ripped to shreds. Dust coats the countertop, trash litters the ruined floor, and weeds poke out of cracks in the tile.

He turns away in time to catch sight of two children slipping from the alleyway across the street. They carry canvas bags stuffed with items they have scavenged. They wear knives strapped to their waists. The girl is in her teens, the boy younger. Their hair is long and unkempt, their clothes shabby, and their eyes hard and feral. They slow to consider him, taking his measure. He waits on them, turns to face them, lets them see that he is not afraid. They glance at each other, whisper something punctuated by furtive gestures, then move away. Like the dogs, they want nothing to do with him.

He continues up the street, the sound of his boots a hollow echo in the midday silence. Office buildings and shops give way to homes. The homes are empty as well, those that are still intact. Many are burned out and sagging, settling slowly back into the earth. Weeds grow everywhere, even through cracks in the concrete of the streets. He wonders how long it has been since anyone has lived here. Counting the strays, the dogs and the children and the one or two others that linger because they have no place else to go, how many are left? In some towns, there is no one. Only the cities continue to provide refuge, walled camps in which survivors have banded together in a desperate effort to keep the madness at bay. Chicago is one such city. He has been there and seen what it has to offer. He already knows its fate.

A woman emerges from the shadows of a doorway in one of the residences, a frail, hollow-eyed creature, dark hair tangled and streaked with purple dye, arms hanging loose and bare, the skin dotted with needle marks. Got anything for me? she asks dully. He shakes his head. She comes down to the foot of the porch steps and stops. She trots out a smile. Where'd you come from? He does not respond. She moves a couple of steps' closer, hugging herself with her thin arms. Want to come in and party with me? He stops her with a look. In the shadows of the house from which she has come, he can see movement. Eyes, yellow and flat, study him with cold intent. He knows who they belong to. Get away from me, he tells the woman. Her face crumples.

She turns back without a word.

He walks to the edge of the town, a mile farther on, out where the park waits. He knows he shouldn't, but he cannot help himself. Nothing of what he remembers remains, but he wants to see anyway. Old Bob and Gran are gone. Pick is gone. Daniel and Wraith are gone. The park is overgrown with weeds and scrub. The cemetery is a cluster of ruined headstones. The townhomes and apartments and houses are all empty. What lives in the park now can be found only in the caves and is his implacable enemy.

And what of Nest Freemark?

He knows that, too. It is a nightmare that haunts him, unrelenting and pitiless.

He stops at the edge of the cemetery and looks off into the shadows beyond. He is here, he supposes, because he has no better place to go. He is here because he is reduced to retracing the steps of his life as a form of penance for his failures. He is hunted at every turn, and so he is drawn to the places that once provided refuge. He searches in the vain hope that something of what was good in his life will resurface, even when he knows the impossibility of that happening.

He takes a long, slow breath. His pursuers will find him again soon enough, but perhaps not this day. So he will walk the park once more and try to recapture some small part of what is lost to him forever.

Across the roadway from where he stands, a billboard hangs in tatters. He can just make out its wording.

WELCOME TO HOPEWELL, ILLINOIS! WE'RE GROWING YOUR WAY!

John Ross woke with a start, jerking upright so sharply that he sent his walking staff clattering to the floor of the bus. For a moment, he didn't know where he was. It was night, and most of his fellow passengers were asleep. He took a moment to collect himself, to remember which journey he was on, which world he was in. Then he maneuvered his bad leg stiffly into the aisle, jockeying himself about on the seat until he was able to reach down and retrieve the staff.

He had fallen asleep in spite of himself, he realized. In spite of what that meant.

He placed the walking stick beside him, leaning it carefully against his knapsack, bracing it in place so that it would not slide away again. An old woman several seats in front of him was still awake. She glanced back at him briefly, her look one of reproof and suspicion. She was the only one who sat

close to him. He was alone at the very back of the bus; the other passengers, all save the old woman, had been careful to take seats near the front. Perhaps it was the leg. Or the shabby clothes. Or the mantle of weariness he wore like the ghost of Marley did his chains. Perhaps it was the eyes, the way they seemed to look beyond what everyone else could see, at once cool and discerning, yet distant and lost, an unsettling contradiction.

But no. He looked down at his hands, studying them. In the manner of one who has come to terms with being shunned, he could ignore the pain of his banishment. Subconsciously, his fellow passengers had made a perfectly understandable decision.

You leave as many empty seats as possible between yourself and Death.

Friday, JULY 1

Chapter One

“Hssst! Nest!”

His voice cut through the cottony layers of her sleep with the sharpness of a cat’s claw. Her head jerked off the pillow and her sleep-fogged eyes snapped open.

“Pick?”

“Wake up, girl!” The sylvan’s voice squeaked with urgency. “The feeders are at it again! I need you!”

Nest Freemark pushed the sheet away and forced herself into an upright position, legs dangling off the side of the bed. The night air was hot and sticky in spite of the efforts of the big floor fan that sat just inside her doorway. She rubbed at her eyes to clear them and swallowed against the dryness in her throat. Outside, she could hear the steady buzz of the locusts in the trees.

“Who is it this tune?” she asked, yawning.

“The little Scott girl.”

“Bennett?” *Oh, God!* She was fully awake now. “What happened?”

Pick was standing on the window ledge just outside the screen, silhouetted in the moonlight. He might be only six inches tall from the tips of his twiggy feet to the peak of his leafy head, but she could read the disgust in his gnarled wooden features as clearly as if he were six feet.

“The mother’s out with her worthless boyfriend again, shutting down bars. That boy you fancy, young Jared, was left in charge of the other kids, but he had one of his attacks, Bennett was still up — you know how she is when her mother’s not there, though goodness knows why. She became scared and wandered off. By the time the boy recovered, she was gone. Now the feeders have her. Do you need this in writing or are you going to get dressed and come help?”

Nest jumped out of the bed without answering, slipped off her nightshirt, and pulled on her Grunge Lives T-shirt, running shorts, socks, and tennis shoes. Her face peeked out at her from the dresser mirror: roundish with a wide forehead and broad cheekbones, pug nose with a scattering of freckles, green eyes that tended to squint, a mouth that quirked upward at the corners as if to suggest perpetual amusement, and a complexion that was starting to break out. Passably attractive, but no stunner. Pick was pacing back and forth on the sill. He looked like twigs and leaves bound together into a child’s tiny

stick man. His hands were making nervous gestures, the same ones they always made when he was agitated — pulling at his silky moss beard and slapping at his bark-encrusted thighs. He couldn't help himself. He was like one of those cartoon characters that charges around running into walls. He claimed he was a hundred and fifty, but for being as old as he was, it didn't seem he had learned very much about staying calm.

She arranged a few pillows under the sheet to give the impression that she was still in the bed, sleeping. The ruse would work if no one looked too closely. She glanced at the clock. It was two in the morning, but her grandparents no longer slept soundly and were apt to be up at all hours of the night, poking about. She glanced at the open door and sighed. There was no help for it.

She nudged the screen through the window and climbed out after it. Her bedroom was on the first floor, so slipping away unnoticed was easy. In the summer anyway, she amended, when it was warm and the windows were all open. In the winter, she had to find her coat and go down the hallway and out the back door, which was a bit more chancy. But she had gotten pretty good at it.

“Where is she?” she asked Pick, holding out her hand, palm up, so he could step into it.

“Headed for the cliffs, last I saw.” He moved off the sill gingerly. “Daniel’s tracking her, but we’d better hurry.” Nest placed Pick on her shoulder where he could get a firm grip on her T-shirt, fitted the screen back in place, and took off at a run. She sped across the back lawn toward the hedgerow that bordered the park, the Midwest night air whipping across her face, fresh and welcoming after the stale closeness of her bedroom. She passed beneath the canopies of solitary oaks and hickories that shaded the yard, their great limbs branching and dividing overhead in intricate patterns, their leaves reflecting dully in the mix of light from moon and stars. The skies were clear and the world still as she ran, the houses about her dark and silent, the people asleep. She found the gap in the hedgerow on the first try, ducked to clear the low opening, and was through.

Ahead, Sinnissippi Park opened before her, softball diamonds and picnic areas bright with moonlight, woods and burial grounds laced with shadows.

She angled right, toward the roadway that led into the park, settling into a smooth, even pace. She was a strong runner, a natural athlete. Her cross-country coach said she was the best he had ever seen, although in the same

breath he said she needed to develop better training habits. At five feet eight inches and a hundred twenty pounds, she was lean and rangy and tough as nails. She didn't know why she was that way; certainly she had never worked at it. She had always been agile, though, even when she was twelve and her friends were bumping into coffee tables and tripping over their own feet, all of them trying to figure out what their bodies were going to do next. (Now they were fourteen, and they pretty much knew.) Nest was blessed with a runner's body, and it was clear from her efforts the past spring that her talent was prodigious. She had already broken every cross-country record in the state of Illinois for girls fourteen and under. She had done that when she was thirteen. But five weeks ago she had entered the Rock River Invitational against runners eighteen and under, girls and boys. She had swept the field in the ten-thousand-meter race, posting a time that shattered the state high school record by almost three minutes. Everyone had begun to look at her a little differently after that.

Of course, they had been looking at Nest Freemark differently for one reason or another for most of her life, so she was less impressed by the attention now than she might have been earlier.

Just think, she reflected ruefully, how they would look at me if I told them about Pick. Or about the magic.

She crossed the ball diamond closest to her house, reached the park entrance, and swept past the crossbar that was lowered to block the road after sunset. She felt rested and strong; her breathing was smooth and her heartbeat steady. She followed the pavement for a short distance, then turned onto the grassy picnic area that led to the Sinnissippi burial mounds and the cliffs. She could see the lights of the Sinnissippi Townhomes off to the right, low-income housing with a fancy name. That was where the Scotts lived. Enid Scott was a single mother with five kids, very few life options, and a drinking problem. Nest didn't think much of her; nobody did. But Jared was a sweetheart, her friend since grade school, and Bennett, at five the youngest of the Scott children, was a peanut who deserved a lot better than she had been getting of late.

Nest scanned the darkness ahead for some sign of the little girl, but there was nothing to see. She looked for Wraith as well, but there was no sign of him either. Just thinking of Wraith sent a shiver down her spine. The park stretched away before her, vast, silent, and empty of movement. She picked up her pace, the urgency of Bennett's situation spurring her on. Pick rode