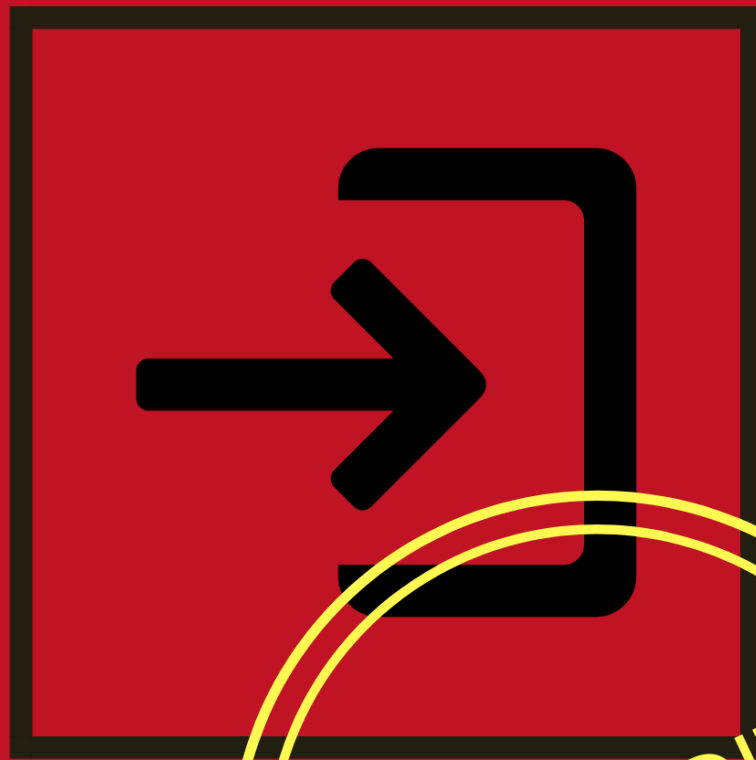


RUBEN LEE SHAW

FAZE BORN



*Divergent meets Chronicles of Narnia
in this Young Adult Fantasy Adventure.*

PREVIEW EDITION

FAZE BORN

By Ruben Lee Shaw

- PREVIEW -

CHAPTER 1

JIM

Jim had spent most of his summers avoiding the monsters in his orphanage. Quite why Gerard and Gus had taken it upon themselves to be his personal tormentors, he did not know. Jim tried to avoid them as best he could. Strangely, and annoyingly for Jim, their movements constantly eluded him. They always seemed to be lurking, waiting around every corner. The two brothers would regularly find him, as if by magic, in some side street or alleyway in town. It was as if they were a fly on the wall of his mind, reading every thought, as if somehow they knew ahead of time. They'd give him a thrashing for no reason other than the fact they found it amusing. Then they'd move on but never before saying "See you later!", with a wink for good measure, the wink that actually meant "We'll be seeing you soon..." They knew he always had to be back at the orphanage by six, for dinner, or he'd get nothing to eat. On occasion, Jim would miss dinner on purpose, which would give him three hours until curfew at 9 pm. If he missed the 9 pm curfew though, there would be hell to pay from the Warden.

The Warden had been the caretaker of the large rickety manor house for at least as long as Jim had been at the orphanage, longer he guessed. She was supposed to look after the house, and all the orphans, but mostly she just shouted various instructions, with her rancid breath, for the orphans to complete. This was her way of keeping up the appearance of the house, giving the illusion that everything was in order, in case she had an inspection. Today, however, Jim did not need to think about any of that. He had climbed down the creaky old wooden stairs as quietly as he ever had. Jim noticed that almost all of the orphans were in the games

room. During the summer, most days were spent in that room. Especially if the brothers were out... Watching the square box and playing video games was how most, including Jim, spent their time. That day, he'd managed to slip past everyone and had exited through the pantry door quietly. Jim continued, almost skipping down the dirt road in the bright sun with a huge grin on his face. Today he would not have to deal with the Warden and her foul air and, perhaps, he could even avoid a whipping from the twins. Jim's excitement quickly came to a sickly halt as he skidded into the back of the two boys he most wanted to avoid in the world, just as the law of sod had intended. It was as if they had apparated in front of him (He'd obviously been watching way too much Harry Potter!)

Jim swore under his breath as he did his best to scramble away from the two brutes. Had he not been in his own world, daydreaming, he might have avoided exactly this. One of the brothers, Gerard, the taller one, grabbed him and pushed him to the ground.

"See, told you he'd be here," he sniggered. The shorter brute, Gus immediately set upon Jim, punching him repeatedly on the same spot for about a minute that, to Jim, felt like more. He tried to wriggle out of their vice-like grip but it was no use. They had years of beating experience. All Jim could do to protect himself was curl up, like a foetus in a mother's womb, to endure what must have been at least his one-hundredth beating. The twins eventually walked away looking bored but pleased with themselves. They didn't say a word as they walked off, they just sniggered and continued walking, one punching the other as if they were two best buds who had just done something really fun. Jim knew it would not be the last time it happened but for now, at least, he was left alone with his lumps and quickly forming bruises.

Jim limped in the direction of Old Street slowly, rubbing his dead arm and leg. He could have moved quicker, fighting through

the pain, but giving the twins some extra walking time was probably a good idea. Old Street held an old barbershop, an old petrol station on the corner and an old grocery store, come to think of it. *Everything in this damn town is so old!* thought Jim.

He walked slowly, slightly dragging his right leg; it felt better to drag it for some reason. It lessened the pain a little. He slid his leg and limped his body, zombie-like towards the back of the grocery store to play with his only true friend, a stray ginger cat. Jim had always thought of the storeowner as a grumpy old man with no hair, whose farts could kill with one release of wind. But, when he discovered the grumpy old man with deadly farts was feeding the ginger cat, he decided that perhaps the old guy was less grumpy and maybe just old and lonely. This did not stop Jim from nicking the occasional sweet from the cornucopia of glass tubs with all types of sweets in each. You just had to be really sneaky whilst unscrewing the lids of some, especially the older tubs. Their squeaky lids could easily give him away - best to leave those ones.

As Jim limped around the back of the store, tears in his eyes and wet snot mixed with blood dripping from his nose, he noticed something strange about the building to the left of him. A building that had sat empty for years. He stared, slack-jawed in disbelief. The outside of the building was now completely smooth and had a reflective black coating on it. Jim could see his own shadowy reflection on the black wall. It made no sense to him because of how black the black was. Jim waved at his shadow and immediately felt like a fool as he watched his shadow mimic his movements, waving back. Further on, he noticed the once broken down entrance had moved. It was no longer on the front of the building but on the side. Jim thought this was very peculiar. Even the name of the store was on the side of the building.

As far as he could tell, nobody ever came down to this side of the building, except for perhaps the cat, and maybe the twins looking for someone innocent to beat up. He quietly read the large

golden words on the side of the reflective black wall: *The Bazaar and Its Comics*. There were no windows or ways to see inside. He remembered how there used to be a large broken window by the old entrance. Jim would not have noticed the door in the wall had it not been for the golden doorknob with the Superman symbol on it.

Only three days had passed since his last visit. He had come down this alley to play with the ginger cat. It didn't seem possible to Jim for a store to be completely rebuilt in that short space of time, or for Jim not to have heard anything about a new store in his old town, where everybody knew everybody else's business. This store had somehow been built and had somehow, very mysteriously, avoided the attention of the whole town. It had been renovated without any of the gossips or nosey-parkers finding out about it, which was a miraculous feat in itself. Nothing was kept secret or hidden in this town.

The same curiosity that had once killed the cat finally got the better of him and he reached his shaky hand towards the golden doorknob.

CHAPTER 2

MARY

Mary awoke as she did every morning, crying out in pain. Her aunt told her that the doctors called it neurofibromatosis, which is often mistaken for the Elephant Man's disease. Mary really didn't understand any of the medical jargon that the doctors had explained to her over and over throughout the years. All she knew was that her legs were abnormally long and thick. Her spine curved, giving her a hump and increasing her pain. Her head was deformed, as was her mouth, which never seemed to close properly.

Mary had had a third operation, seven weeks ago now, to remove a tumour. They had said there were no complications and that the operation had gone smoothly. What they had not told her, however, was just how much pain she would be in. There was, of course, always pain, but it was different this time.

Mary wiped away the hair stuck to her face and eyes with one hand and held her neck with the other. They had removed a tumour the size of a small orange from her neck but it had left a large bruised wound, which now had a rainbow of colours surrounding it.

Of course, they had given Aunt Sue some great medicine, which helped for a decent few hours and occasionally, if she was lucky, for a whole day. Mary had to take green and yellow capsules, every six hours, which she didn't mind. The problem was, there were nights where she slept through, causing her to wake up with no painkillers in her system. That was exactly why, on this particular morning, she had woken up crying in such a way.

Thankfully, her aunt burst through the bedroom door carrying a plate of porridge, a glass of water, and the oblong pills on a tray. They rolled back and forth as Sue hurried to Mary's side looking like they were trying to escape. Somehow, with a level of skill that Mary could not fathom, she managed not to spill the tray, and all its contents, on the fluffy, cream carpet. "Come now child, you're stronger than that," Sue said, in her firm yet comforting voice.

Aunt Sue was the only family Mary had. Her parents had dropped her off thirteen and half years ago on the doorstep of Sue's house, in a basket with a note. There had been nothing from them since. Not one postcard, not one letter, no email - nothing. Aunt Sue was both mother and father to Mary. Not once, to Mary's recollection, had Sue complained about raising a girl with her difficulties or paying for all the medical expenses. She had been treated as a daughter even though she was not.

Mary spent the next hour and a half smiling at her aunt whilst doing her best to eat without dribbling food down the side of her mouth. She ate, swallowed the pills and got dressed slowly. Getting dressed was often the worst part of her day and would normally put her in a bad mood for the day. She knew that things could be much worse, and was very grateful to Aunt Sue for everything she had done for her, but sometimes the pain, day in and day out, was too much for her to bear.

The morning routine was long and boring but had to be done in small, slow steps. After about ten minutes of searing joint movement, Mary put on her second size ten sneaker and tied the

laces. This was one thing she could do herself. Being hunched over all the time was difficult but at least she could do this. It took some effort but she did it.

Mary was eager to go outside today, which was a strange feeling for her. Many years ago, Mary had gone to school in town. Sadly, it had only lasted about a week. Aunt Sue had quickly removed her from the school after Mary came out with a horde of children each day, taking it upon themselves to shout insults at her and throw anything they could get their hands on at her: Stones, empty cans, even an old diaper had once been chucked at her. How the school could have allowed this was beyond her aunt's understanding.

Even now Mary could remember the insults: "Monster! Deformed cow! U.G.L.Y... you ugly... you ugly... go back to the swamp! 'Thing!'" Nope, Mary shook her head; she would not allow herself a pity party today. Today was a good day. Mary was going to see her best friend; the only friend she had other than Aunt Sue. Mary packed a water bottle, some canned food, a can opener, and small purple fluffy ball. Today, Mary got to see Pat, the Ginger cat.

Mary had once needed to pee really badly at the only grocery store in town and could not wait until she got home. Mr Crow had grumpily offered the store toilet in the back, but only after Sue had kicked up a fuss. When Mary had finished, she had taken the wrong exit. One of the side effects of the pills was that she would often get confused about which direction she had come from. She had ended up at the back of the store. It was there that she had met Pat for the first time. When Aunt Sue and the store owner finally found her, Mary learned that the ginger cat was a stray and that the grumpy storeowner had named her Pat because she insisted, the way that only cats can, on being patted. Mary pleaded with Aunt Sue to let her take Pat home but Aunt Sue was having none of it.

In the end, they came to a deal with Mr Crow. She could visit

Pat twice a week and even feed her if she wanted to. Mary grabbed her bag, shouting “G’bye” to Aunt Sue as best she could.

Talking was not her strength.

Walking, however, was. Out of all her deformities, Mary loved the fact that her legs were strong. It was the only part of her body that was. So, walking had become Mary’s favourite thing to do. Aunt Sue knew that there was no way to talk Mary out of walking into town. It was at least one mile on dirt pathways and swampy woods before she’d get into town but that didn’t faze Mary in the least. Even the ache in her neck was ignored. Hunched over, Mary walked, unable to conceal the large grin on her face. She was going to see her furry friend, Pat.

CHAPTER 3

THE STORE

The golden door handle felt cool in Jim's sweaty hand. Jim looked for reassurance that it was okay to go inside, he looked for a sign that it was open. No signs could be seen on the shiny black wall or door. For a second Jim let go of the handle, for a second allowed fear to win the battle, but the thought of a new comic book store in his own town outweighed any fear of opening the door to this strange store. Jim turned the golden doorknob with the Superman symbol on it. He expected the door to creak and groan the way doors did in some of those scary movies the brothers had made all the orphans watch. The door swung open silently.

In fact, Jim could have entered unannounced, were it not for the tiny bell sitting on the inside just above the door. The bell rang a sweet little chime and then the door closed quietly behind him. Jim stood still, frozen, staring all around, trying to take in his new surroundings. He could see row upon row of neatly laid out racks, holding every type of comic book or graphic novel that he could imagine. Of course, the racks were shiny and black. The floor, however, was brilliant white, making for quite an eye-catching

contrast. Above the racks on the black walls were some shelves with all sorts of collectible figurines on them. There was the Terminator, a Dalek from Doctor Who and a Smurf holding a cigar, which he couldn't quite understand. All around the room, high above the racks, sat figurines and comic posters that made Jim smile in wonder and yet he felt sad at the same time. He wanted all these amazing things but had no money to his name.

In the corner, Jim spotted two old arcade machines. Pac Man and Streetfighter. Sounds were flying out from them, both seemingly fighting for dominance—for their theme tune to be heard over the others. It was a fantastic mess of noise and Jim loved it. In fact, right away, Jim knew that this was his new best place to be in the world. Not that he had experienced anywhere else in the world other than this crummy old town. Jim could not imagine that there could be any place better in the world to be. He made his way towards the front of the store, his wide eyes darting left and right, looking at every comic book cover he could. Batman vs. Superman... Planet Hulk... His brain buzzed with excitement as he quietly made his way toward the glass counter at the front of the store.

The sounds of the arcade machines stopped as they finished their theme fighting and returned to their programmed silence, awaiting their next player. Jim could hear someone moving about but couldn't see anyone. In a flat glass cabinet, he could see some very expensive looking comics: Spiderman issue #1, Bones issue #2 and The Swamp Thing issue #1. They had no price tags but, by the way they were presented in the cabinet and in specially hardened sleeves of their own, Jim thought they must be super expensive. On the edges of the counter sat an old cash register, some collectible cards, Pokémon, Might and Magic and something called Warhammer. Jim looked around behind the counter and could see another door leading out back.

“Ummm... Excuse me! Hello! Anyone there?” Jim called,

nervous. A startling voice with a very strange accent responded suddenly:

“Yes, yes. Vat is it?” Jim could not see where the person who had spoken was.

“Can I look around?” Jim asked sheepishly. Again, the voice responded abruptly.

“Fine, fine. Look, look.” the strange accent said and stopped suddenly. Jim decided the accent sounded almost Russian, but not quite. Of course, he couldn’t be sure because he’d only seen Russian people on TV. Jim didn’t much care though. He had permission to look. The Russian voice didn’t say he could not read them or look through them. Before he knew it, he had a pile of graphic novels in his lap. Jim sat on the floor in his own superhero world reading and fighting alongside Batman, Wolverine, and many others. If it weren’t for his numb bum, he wouldn’t have realised what the time was.

Jim looked at the cheap plastic watch on his wrist, which shone digital numbers at him. 18.05 it said. He had missed dinner. Jim was amazed that no one had come to chase him away, that no one shouted at him for reading and not buying. Jim knew he should go but he hadn’t finished the Hulk graphic novel he’d been reading and he desperately wanted to know what would happen to Dr. Banner. Jim put all the books back where he had found them. Well, not all... The Hulk had somehow stayed in his hands.

“Mister! Hello, you there?” No response. Again, Jim called, “Ummm, Mister?”

Still no response. Jim’s heart began to beat faster and faster. He knew what he was about to do but he told himself it was okay, he could just return it in the morning and he’d really look after it. No one would know. It was fine. Besides, what kind of store owner doesn’t look after his own products? Jim walked quietly towards the entrance, willing the storeowner not to suddenly appear and catch him. The bell rang its quiet chime. Nobody shouted or

grabbed him from behind.

There was, however, someone standing in the doorway, and Jim stumbled backward, panic setting in

.

If you have enjoyed this preview and would like to find out more about the book, please head on over to

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