

The Twilight Journey

CHAPTER ZERO

Shadows Sighing at the Edge of the World

The end of the year drew nigh, and with the turning of the seasons came gray skies and early nights. In the darkness, biting winds swept across the city, like the icy breath of a malicious god. Snow fell, seemingly without cease, from the gloom above, piling up on the streets and walks below, a thick coagulant slowing the flow of life. In a misconceived attempt to ward against dolor and despond in the face of these events, the city's occupants had adorned their surroundings with impressive displays of finery, in red and green, violet and blue, silver and gold: festive banners writhed in the wind above lampposts hidden by twisted lengths of garland; strings of bulbs cast forth their lurid light, framing panes of glass and the harsh facades of the city's buildings and enduing them with an illusory vitality; thousands of prettified trees—living, dead, or otherwise—stood tall both indoors and out, all topped with splendid stars, winsome angels, or other such figures of embellishment; and a multitudinous array of signage and ornamentation were flaunted on windows and walls, proclaiming joy

and merriment for all during this bleak season.

Indeed, the proclamations were not entirely untrue, for the spirits of good cheer had descended, lured by this ostentatious display. Above the cold, dead earth, they frolicked gaily, invisible, but palpable nonetheless. They exuded energy wherever they went, and when they required rest, they made for themselves homes in the hearts of men and women and children, and there they nestled. All whom the spirits touched felt uplifted, freed for a time from the burdens of life and the world, and they committed acts of kindness, joy, and love, and with the energy of these acts were the spirits fed. They grew, and they bred. Kindness begat kindness. Joy begat joy. Love begat love.

But in those dark places where the lights of the season did not shine—in the basements, and in the alleys, and in the dark thoughts of mankind—in these and other such places lurked different spirits, malicious and ravening. Like their cheerful counterparts, they wafted, invisible, on the air, until they found a suitable host. In human hearts they lodged, and they fed on the life energy they found therein, in return spewing forth darkness, which festered within the persons whom they infected, until it consumed them. The spirits lodged within these hearts, and therein they bred, and when there was no room remaining to contain them, the newly spawned spirits broke forth to wander in the darkness, seeking out new hosts, latching onto them, and repeating the cycle of consumption and propagation.

The spirits were multitudinous, far outnumbering the people of the world, and so they battled for territory. The spirits of light could not long live in the darkness, and the spirits of darkness were destroyed by the light. But in the shadows—in the twilight realms of the world, where darkness and light melded together—there the spirits met and battled for supremacy. The winner was free to choose a host, and the loser was destroyed. There had been a balance once in numbers, but of late, the evil spirits had grown stronger, and they won most of the battles against the spirits of light. Why they had become so strong, it was difficult to say; some

might say it was because human hearts had become darker, thus giving them more space in which to breed—but that would be untrue, for it was the spirits themselves that brought the darkness into human hearts. It had to be something else—a change in the fundamental nature of the world. Whatever it was, though, it had tipped the balance. The malicious spirits destroyed the spirits of joy, and so they became the majority. They continued to breed, and they displaced the light.

Thus, the darkness grew.

Beneath the Plain of Edinu, in the underground chamber wherein he had taken refuge, King Melchizedek conferred with seven of the wisest and most powerful inhabitants of his realm: Zadok, the high priest of the land; Aliyah, the seeress; Yahya, the king's brother and trusted advisor; the *malakhim* Mikhael, Zadkiel, and Kamael; and one of the nameless *karabmesh*.

“What are we to do?” Melchizedek asked, addressing the assembly at large. His voice quavered with age and weakness, but he managed a stern gaze as his eyes met those of every other person and creature gathered there. At some point, each individual in the chamber had voiced the same concern. No feasible answer had yet been advanced, and the king had no expectations that the question would be answered this time either. Still, he held out hope in the face of overwhelming odds, for he knew no other way. He continued, “Turannos grows stronger by the day, and I grow weaker. My power can no longer sustain the land, and so it is dying. Magic falters. Demons break loose from their shells. The seals that protect this realm from the outside world are weakening. The Tree of Life withers, and its fruit is bitter and lacking in nourishment. The Ladder of Lights glows but faintly, and it conducts a mere fraction of the energy it once did. Contact has been lost with the Celestial Kingdom. The light of immortality no longer shines brightly within the *malakhim*. The very souls of the *tzadikim* are dying. And,

worst of all—” The king paused, and had it been any other man, it might be assumed that it was for effect; but it was Melchizedek, and those assembled knew well that he was dying, knew that he spent a great amount of vital energy just to speak and that he paused to allow himself a respite. They allowed him his moment of rest, waiting patiently for his continuation. “Worst of all,” he repeated a moment later, “the one man who might save this land and its inhabitants, the one man who might restore the light of this world has been too long outside Edinu, has dwelt too long in the darkness. He is not yet fully prepared to perform the tasks required of him. I fear we are condemned to annihilation.”

“Unless we act against Turannos soon,” agreed Yahya, “we may very well be. In my wanderings, I have seen and heard that the people of the land feel that we have failed them. Each day, more proclaim themselves willing subjects of Turannos. They feel it is better to live in subjugation than to risk the death he promises to those who defy him. They feel the loss of magic, the loss of contact with the supernal energy that once flowed abundantly between the Celestial Kingdom and Edinu. They are disheartened, and they know not what to do.”

“Nor do I,” admitted the king. “We have not engaged in battle against Turannos and his forces in some time—and with good reason.” He looked at the *malakhim*, gazed upon the scars of battle that marred their once comely faces, knowing their vibrant robes hid even more wounds. His face displayed his sadness. Until recently, the magnificent beings would not have been damaged in battle. But things had changed since the dark and powerful Turannos had usurped the throne.

Mikhael spoke, his voice strong and resonant. “My Lord King, the *malakhim* fear no battle against the enemy, but as you yourself said, the light of immortality that once blazed within us has dwindled. We are not weak, and we are deathless still, but we can be wounded severely. We are far outnumbered by the demonic hordes of Turannos, and without the full strength of the light, we would surely fail in battle

against them. We can be of little help without the power provided by one such as he of whom you speak.”

“Perhaps,” said Zadok, in a quiet tone, “it is time to bring the young man home, to send him forth against the usurper, no matter his state of unreadiness.”

The king sat silently, considering the priest’s advice, stroking his dark beard all the while. After a moment, he nodded. “Very well, Zadok. Your underlings have been observing him, reporting on his readiness, awaiting the order to guide him home. The order is given. Relay it. Have your people prepare him now, if such is possible; if not, bring him anyway, and pray that he might deliver us from the evil that has invaded this world, for if he does not, then all hope is lost, and the darkness will reign.”

Lucas Ferritor feared the darkness, for at times he saw the things that lurked within. At times he heard them speak, in voices that grated like metal on glass, of the evil they perpetrated in the world. He knew what these spirits did, knew how they flew, pierced savagely through a person’s skin, entered into the heart, and caused that person to become violent or angry or miserable, for at times he had seen that too. He had seen it occur many times in his life, and he was afraid it might happen to him—or, God forbid it!—that it might already have happened, that he might be one of the possessed.

He avoided the darkness when he could, and he tried his hardest not to worry about the issue of possession, or—since it was easier—he simply found other things to occupy his mind instead. There were two things especially that worked quite well most of the time, and he found himself doing them often. He was, in fact, engaged in these activities on the fateful Tuesday night, two weeks before Christmas, that he met Simon.

Light-skinned, attractive, with a youthful appearance, and smartly dressed in a black sports coat, matching dress trousers, and a shirt possessed of the same intense hue as

the fine-grade amethyst that he wore in a ring upon his right middle finger—in stark contrast to Lucas' own ripped blue jeans and patched coat—Simon had sauntered up and seated himself to Lucas' left at the poker table in the back of an old tumbledown tavern called The Jolly Beggar. He had flashed a charming smile, given his first name alone as introduction to the others at the table, and said he was “just passing through on business.” Then he had thrown down in a single crisp bill the hundred dollars required to buy into the no-limits tournament and had proceeded over the past ninety minutes to amass an exceedingly large assortment of chips—by far, the majority of the table's wealth.

Lucas took stock of Simon's chips and then tallied up his own. Simon's hoard was larger by a factor of three; happily, though, Lucas still found himself in second place, with two thousand dollars in tournament chips, more than five times the sum contained in the matching stacks of Benny and James, the two remaining competitors. As long as his luck held, those two would be out within the next few hands, and he would be assured of ending the game in second place, at least, and winning the correspondent prize of two hundred dollars—which would put him a hundred ahead for the night. *Not bad*, he consoled himself, *for just a couple hours' work*.

He took a sip of his vodka and tonic—his third of the night—and examined the two cards the dealer had just given him: the three and four of diamonds. Group seven suited connectors, the pros called them, which was their fancy way of saying they were worth betting the minimum on before the flop. Lucas had his own system, differing from the professionals'. To him, diamonds were money cards. He had always thought of them that way, although he was unsure why he called them that, exactly—perhaps because the diamonds suggested wealth in his mind. Whatever the reason, he usually had decent luck with them, and being dealt two of them was his signal to bet. So, he put in the sixty dollars necessary to match the big blind, and he waited for the next three cards, taking another sip of his drink as he did so.

He watched Miranda, the dealer, burn the top card from the deck, and he followed her pale, lissome hands as they moved back and forth between her stack of cards and the table, laying down the flop: the five of diamonds, the six of diamonds, and the ace of hearts.

Lucas smiled inwardly. The odds of getting a winning hand this round were fair.

Apparently, though, each man at the table felt the same about his own hand. By the time the betting was over, Simon had put in a fair amount, and both Benny and James—two regulars whom Lucas knew well—had gone all in. They were both good players, cautious players. It was unlikely that either would throw in all his money on a wing and a prayer. No, they both had to have good hands, and Lucas started to worry. Even the lowest pair would beat what he had at the moment.

He worried more after the turn. It was the four of clubs. It gave him a pair, but that was not enough to set him at ease. He would not be out of the game if he lost this hand to Benny or James, but neither would he be guaranteed second place; whichever man won would be in a position to make a comeback.

Time seemed to draw on as Lucas waited for Miranda to place the river card, and when she finally did, he exhaled audibly—an uncharacteristic action, but it was the seven of diamonds. He had a straight flush. Unless Benny or James had the eight and nine of the same suit in their hands—or two more fours—then Lucas was exactly where he wanted to be. He bet a hundred and looked at Simon.

The newcomer gazed back, his mouth just slightly upturned, and his dark brown eyes unreadable. After a moment, he folded.

Benny and James showed their cards. Each had three of a kind, Benny with sixes and James with aces.

Lucas smiled. He had won the hand.

He picked up his glass and went to take a sip. The alcohol was gone. Distracted by the tension of the game, he had finished it without realizing.

He waited while Miranda gave Benny and James their prize money—fifty dollars each, an equal split of the hundred-dollar third-place prize—and then he addressed her, in his characteristically meek tone.

“Miranda,” he said, his words coming quick and slurring slightly, “would you mind declaring a break? I’d sure like to step outside for a cigarette and get a refill on my drink. Maybe use the bathroom. How long have we been sitting here, anyway?”

The young woman smiled and said, “It’s 8:30. Go ahead and take a break. Make it quick, though. I could use one myself, and I have to watch the table ’til you both get back.”

Bathed in the dim yellow light of a streetlamp, Lucas stood on the snow-covered sidewalk, smoking a clove cigarette and thinking about the darkness around him. He had managed to make it through the dimly lit bar and the few feet of night between the door and the lamp without seeing any of those terrible creatures whipping about in the darkness. It was the alcohol, he knew. He was not sure why it worked, but it did. It stopped him from seeing things no other people could see, and it stopped him from hearing the voices no other people could hear—both the external ones and the internal. The sights and sounds—the “Invaders,” as he called them—had stopped for now, thanks to the vodka, but he knew they would return when he sobered up. He knew the things were still out there, could feel them still, and so he still did his best to avoid the darkness, to remain in the light.

He was attempting to force these thoughts from his mind when a voice interrupted. Startled, afraid he was hearing one of those Invaders he so feared and hated, he dropped his cigarette. Quickly, he retrieved it from the sidewalk, and as he did, he noticed a shadow. He was relieved to discover it had been a real person speaking, that the alcohol had done its job this night.

“You all right, man?” the voice said. It was a distinctive voice, and Lucas recognized it as belonging to Michael Blake,

Lucas' only real friend since high school—and the man who had introduced him to Ennoia. He had been a cook at The Jolly Beggar for the past six years, and it was because of him that Lucas had begun patronizing the bar in the first place. As Lucas turned to face him, Michael spoke again. “I didn't mean to scare you.”

“No—it—it's fine,” Lucas stammered. “Whaddaya need?”

Michael flashed a mirthless smile. “How's business?” he asked. “Find any good gigs yet?”

“Nah. Nobody needs a two-bit musician that doesn't draw a crowd. The only money I make is what Jack and Laurie pay me for playing weekends here.”

“Yeah. Listen. That's what I came to talk to you about.”

Lucas raised his brow inquisitively. His eyes exhibited sadness in anticipation of the news to come.

“Hey, you said it yourself. You just don't draw enough of a crowd to justify the expense, man. Now, it's not that you're a two-bit musician, Luke. Nah, you're good. But the economy's in a slump. People just aren't comin' here like they used to. Jack and Laurie aren't makin' the money they used to. They've already closed the door on the couple of cover bands that used to play here—you know that. They've kept you on as long as they can. They say they're still willing to keep you—and they're gonna advertise for other musicians, too. But they can't afford to renew their music licenses for the new year, so they're gonna require all original work from now on. They figure that'll be different enough from the other bars around, and it'll draw a good crowd, so they can continue to pay. You understand, right?”

Lucas took a long drag from his cigarette. “Yeah,” he muttered.

“I hate to be the one to break it to ya, but they figured you'd take it better from me.”

Lucas did not respond but merely flicked his cigarette to the sidewalk and ground it violently beneath his boot, then covered it with snow. He headed back inside, and as he did, he heard Michael speak once more.

“Let me know if there's anything I can do to help.”



Back inside the tavern, Lucas ordered another drink—a double this time—and then returned to the poker table, where he resumed his seat next to Simon, who himself had purchased another drink. With both men now able to keep an eye on the table and on each other, Miranda left, heading toward the restroom. Lucas began sipping at his vodka and tonic.

“Pardon me,” Simon said, “but you don’t look so well at the moment. Are you sure you should be drinking that?”

“What’s it to you?” Lucas replied.

“I’m just concerned. That’s all.” There was sincerity in Simon’s voice.

“I’ll be all right,” said Lucas.

“You sure? You seem a bit dispirited. Something happen while you were gone?”

“I said I’m fine,” Lucas snapped. He changed the subject. “So, what’s your story, anyway? You say you’re passing through on business. What, exactly, do you do?”

“I do,” said Lucas, “a great many things. But you are asking how I make my income, yes?” He did not wait for Lucas to respond but continued on, “Cards, my friend. Games of chance, such as the one we play tonight.”

“That’s it?” Lucas wondered. “You play poker, and you make your income from it?”

Simon nodded.

“You must have the devil’s own luck, man.”

Simon looked at Lucas with steely eyes. “There are no devils involved, sir. I make my own luck.”

“Whaddaya mean?”

“Luck, Mr. Ferritor, is simply the result of any number of events occurring seemingly at random to produce a favorable result. I merely nudge those events along in ways that I would have them occur to produce the outcome I desire.”

“I’m afraid I don’t get it,” Lucas said.

“It is a subtle science, altering reality in conformity with my will.”

“You’re not makin’ any sense, man. You must be drunker ’n I am. How many o’ those green whatever-ya-call-’ems have you had?”

“The drink is called Chartreuse; this is my third of the night, and I assure you, I am not in the least bit intoxicated. I’m talking about magic, Mr. Ferritor.”

“Card tricks, then. You cheat.”

“Mm...last time I read the definition of cheating, it required dishonest or unfair actions. Well, I am an honest person, Mr. Ferritor. I have told you precisely what it is I do. And as for fairness, well, in many cases fairness is relative. No, I am not a cheater. This I swear. And I ask that you not make such accusations in the future.”

“What are you then?”

Simon opened his mouth to respond, but at that moment, Miranda returned and interrupted. “How’s it goin’, guys? Ready to get back to the game?”

“Yeah,” Lucas said. “I just got the message that Jack and Laurie no longer need my musical talent. I could use the big money more than ever.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that,” Miranda said with genuine sadness. “Good luck, then.”

She dealt the cards.

Lucas got a pair of aces in the hole. Diamonds and clubs. Good luck, indeed. He raised the bet that round, and Simon called it.

The flop revealed another ace—the heart—along with the king and queen of spades. Three aces now. His luck was holding. By the end of the betting round, half his money was in the pot.

On the turn, Miranda put down the eight of diamonds. It was no help for Lucas, but he doubted it was any help for his opponent either. Half of his remaining chips went into the pot, and to his surprise, Simon called it. He wondered just what Simon had that made him confident enough to keep going. A pair of kings? Three, maybe? It didn’t matter; the aces would win.

Lucas was confident as Miranda laid down the final

card—and he was ecstatic when he saw what it was. The ace of spades. The last of the four aces in the deck. Nothing could top his four of a kind except a straight flush—and the odds of that were astronomical. Lucas went all in, shoving his pile of chips into the center of the table and standing up for the showdown, just like the pros. He fully expected Simon to back down. Instead, the man calmly pushed all his chips forward and stood, his face beaming with confidence.

Lucas had a moment of doubt, but he revealed his cards and said, “Four aces. You can’t beat that.”

Simon replied, “Oh, but I can,” and he tossed his cards down. Lucas collapsed into his chair when he saw that Simon had been holding the ten and jack of spades. Combined with the queen, king, and ace on the table, they made a royal flush.

“But, how?” Lucas said. “The odds. The luck.”

“I told you, Mr. Ferritor, I make my own luck.”

“You cheated.”

“I am a man of honor, Mr. Ferritor,” said Simon, and his gaze became stern. “I suggest you do not accuse me of cheating ever again. Now—” His face became friendly again. “—you’re up a hundred dollars for the night. You should be satisfied.”

“Yeah,” said Lucas. “And I woulda been if I hadn’t just lost my only source of money in the world.”

“Mm...yes. Finances can be burdensome,” said Simon, “but there are things more important than money.” He turned to Miranda. “My dear lady, have you an extra pack of cards? Unopened?”

Miranda looked at Simon quizzically, but she dug into her supply case nevertheless and gave him a deck of cards still sealed in plastic.

“Thank you.” He proceeded to open the pack. He removed the cards, discarded the jokers, and shuffled them three times. He fanned them out and showed them to Lucas, making sure Miranda could see as well. “What do you see, Mr. Ferritor?”

“Cards,” Simon replied, his voice flat.

“An ordinary deck of cards?”

“Yeah.”

“In random order?”

“Yes.”

Simon closed the fan, picked up the ace of spades from the table and placed it at the front of the deck. “The ace of spades,” he said. “It is called the death card. Indeed, it was bad luck for you, Mr. Ferritor. It gave you four aces, yes, but it completed my straight, as well. Without it, I would have had nothing, and you would have won the hand with a three of a kind.”

“What’s your point?” Lucas wondered.

“Oh, I have more than one point to make. If you pay close attention, perhaps you will grasp them all. Now, I said that there are things more important than money, and I will prove it to you.”

“How’s that?”

Simon smiled. “You have won two hundred dollars this evening. It is a hundred more than you came in with, and it is money you claim to need, now that you have lost your job. Am I correct?”

Lucas nodded.

“Then you wouldn’t dare bet it—all or nothing—against my winnings tonight.”

“Your three hundred,” Lucas said. “Five hundred total?”

“That’s correct. I will offer you a wager. If you win, you keep your two hundred dollars and take my three as well. If you lose, I get all five hundred, and you go home with nothing.”

“What’s the bet?”

“There are now two aces of spades in this deck. The odds of picking one at random are roughly one in twenty-six. I will wager that I can do it. I’ll even let you shuffle the cards again.”

Lucas considered Simon’s proposition for a moment: two hundred dollars guaranteed against the chance of five hundred to help sustain him and his wife until he could find another gig. The odds were definitely in his favor.

"I'll take the bet."

"You can walk away now with two hundred dollars," said Simon, "and yet you choose to accept the wager. You have proven a point, Mr. Ferritor. You hope to win. I think, perhaps, you are compelled to bet. Hope, compulsion. Maybe even faith—faith in the statistical laws of the universe, mind you, but faith nonetheless. You have shown these to be more important, in your mind, than the money you were guaranteed."

"Hand me the cards," Lucas said harshly. Simon did so, and Lucas shuffled them three times. Then he fanned them, faces down, on the table.

"The ace of spades," Simon said. "It is a powerful symbol to some, for it represents death. Many are afraid of dying, but what is death but a change, a transformation so profound that one cannot understand it without experiencing it, and having experienced it cannot remember what life was like before and so cannot tell others what it means to die." As he spoke, he waved his hand slowly over the cards, as if attempting to detect some subtle signal that would indicate where he might find the specified card.

"Get on with it," said Lucas.

Simon shrugged and chose a card. He did not look at it, but he showed it to Lucas and Miranda with a smile. "The ace of spades," he said.

Lucas' eyes widened. "No," he whispered.

"How did you know?" Miranda asked, bemused.

Simon gathered the cards together, flipped the deck over, and fanned them out again. Each one was the ace of spades. He looked pointedly at Simon. "Transformation," he said. "I hope you have learned something, Mr. Ferritor, for knowledge, too, is more important than money."

Lucas did not respond, merely moved his gaze back and forth between Simon's face and the cards.

"That was amazing," Miranda interjected. "How'd you do it?"

Simon did not seem to hear her. He continued, in a quieter, more sympathetic tone, "As with any important thing,

the act of giving is equally important as—if not more important than—the act of receiving. You may keep the five hundred dollars. You did a foolish thing tonight, Mr. Ferritor, betting all your money as you did. I hope I am not encouraging further foolishness with my gift. I hope you may yet grow wise.” With that, he turned and walked away.

The next morning, sunlight shone through the bedroom window in Lucas’ small apartment, rousing him from his slumber. His remembrances of the previous night’s events were tenuous, filtered by hours of sleep and the diffusion of the alcohol within his system, and he felt as though he were waking from a dream. As he became lucid, he realized that he could smell the scent of breakfast wafting on the air. He inhaled deeply, smiled, and moved to get out of bed.

He threw off the covers and stood. Despite the cold outside, the apartment was warm, thanks to central heating, and Lucas remained clad in his underclothes alone as he walked from the bedroom to the kitchen, where he found his wife, Ennoia, already dressed and made up for the day, standing in front of the stove, cooking a typically hearty breakfast of omelets, chorizo hash, and avocado toast. She loved to cook—especially breakfasts—and hoped, in fact, to do it professionally someday. As was usual when making breakfast, she appeared content. Lucas approached from behind, pulled aside her jet-black hair, and kissed her lightly on the back of her neck.

Ennoia turned, smiled, and kissed Lucas on the lips. “Good morning,” she said, turning back to the stovetop.

“Morning,” Lucas responded.

“So, you were really tired when you came in last night—and more than a little drunk. How’re you feeling?”

“Not too bad. Still feeling the alcohol a bit, I suppose.”

“Mm. Well. How’d things go?”

“Well, I won five hundred bucks at the poker table.”

“That’s great, baby. Better than usual.”

“Yeah,” said Lucas dejectedly. “Good thing, too. It’s gonna

have to last a while.”

Ennoia turned around again. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I lost the gig at the bar.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I wouldn’t joke about a thing like that, babe. No, I guess they just couldn’t afford me anymore. You know they’ve been slowly letting all the performers go. I’m the last one left, and I don’t draw enough of a crowd to justify their licensing expenses. They’re only willing to let people play there if they do original stuff.”

“Well,” said Ennoia, “that’s not too surprising, I suppose. The Jolly Beggar’s in the middle of downtown Portland, and the people there don’t really want to listen to old Dylan covers all the time—no matter how good they may be.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Lucas said. “But—”

“Here,” Ennoia interrupted, “your food is ready. Throw on your robe and sit down. We’ll talk about it while we eat.”

“Right.” Lucas went to the bedroom and emerged a moment later wearing his hunter green robe. He grabbed some plates, glasses and utensils and prepared two place settings at the table. He went to the refrigerator and poured a glass of orange juice for Ennoia. He grabbed a can of Sparks for himself.

Ennoia sighed as Lucas sat and popped open his drink, but she said nothing, knowing it would do no good. Instead, she merely thanked her husband for the glass of juice and said, “So, you were saying?”

Lucas took a swig of his drink and then replied flippantly, “I was saying I don’t cover just Dylan. I do Gordon Lightfoot, you know, a little Johnny Cash, and some Sting, of course—”

“You know what I mean, Luke.”

“Yeah. I know. The artsy, hipster types downtown like to hear fresh, original sounds.”

“That’s right,” Ennoia said solemnly.

“I don’t do original works,” said Lucas sternly, punctuating the statement with another quaff from his can of Sparks.

Ennoia stared at Lucas, one eyebrow raised, and she halted her fork’s upward journey halfway to her mouth.

“What do you mean, you don’t do original works? I’ve heard you sing them. You’ve got enough songs—enough *good* songs—to record three or four chart-topping albums. And while you’re waiting to get famous, you could still sing at the Beggar, get gigs at cafés—”

“I wrote those songs for me,” Lucas interrupted. “You and Mike are the only others who have ever heard them. They’re personal.”

“Of course they’re personal, Lucas. That’s what makes them good. They mean something. They take your experiences and turn them into something everyone can understand. They make people feel what you feel—in their hearts, Lucas, and in the very depths of their souls. They’re powerful songs—the kind of songs that can impact people, maybe even change their lives. Ask Michael; he’ll tell you the same thing.”

“They’re not that good, and I—that is, what if people—” Lucas fell quiet.

“I know, honey, you’re afraid to share yourself so intimately with others. You doubt yourself, and you’re afraid of what they’ll say. You’re a poet, with the fragile ego that entails. You have to move past that, Lucas, you have to—”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” interrupted Lucas. “Let’s just eat, forget about it for now. I don’t want to argue.”

“That’s fine,” said Ennoia, and they finished breakfast in silence.

Afterward, they rinsed off their dishes and put them in the dishwasher. As they did, Lucas complimented his wife on her cooking.

“When you’re all finished with your classes at the culinary institute, you’re gonna make a great professional chef. I don’t know how you do it. You take those basic, raw ingredients and turn them into a culinary masterpiece with seeming effortlessness.”

Ennoia smiled sincerely. “It’s the fire that forges the final product; I merely guide the ingredients along their path through the flame. It’s...well, it’s my own brand of magic. Just like music is yours. You’ve told me before, the music is

out there, and you harness it like a...what were your words? A medium for the muse? That's your magic."

Lucas frowned and repeated, glumly, "Magic."

"Yeah. Magic. What's wrong?"

Lucas described to Ennoia his encounter with Simon the previous evening.

"You took that bet?" she said, when he was done. "I can't believe it. Even though you knew we were going to need the money and you had a sure thing with the two hundred—"

"I won," Lucas protested.

"You lost," Ennoia countered. "And you got lucky that Simon character took pity on you—or thought he was teaching you a lesson—or whatever his reasoning was."

"Whatever. It doesn't matter. I came home with five hundred bucks, right?"

Ennoia shook her head. "Listen, I don't want to argue about it, and I don't have the time even if I did want to. I have to be to work at noon, and I've got a bit of household shopping to do before that.

"Why don't you grab a shower? You can clear your head, figure out what you want to do with your future. Maybe you could work on some music—you haven't written much lately—or get together some songs to play. My shift at the Roxy ends at nine, so meet me there, and we'll have a light dinner and talk it over."

"Mm," Lucas muttered.

"Or I can meet you at the Beggar. I know you'll be there, anyway. Just don't spend too much on drinks and cards."

"I know," said Lucas firmly. "Money's always been tight, Ennoia, and I understand that it's gonna be tighter for a while. I'm not stupid."

"I know that. I just meant—you know, rent and utilities are due on the first, and I wanna have enough to buy some gifts—nothing really expensive, of course, just—never mind; I suppose we can talk about it later. See you after work. And promise me you won't take such a stupid bet again. You got lucky, but people like that can rarely be trusted—and, even if they can, then the odds are still against you. Okay?"

Lucas nodded, and he accompanied his wife to the front door, next to which lounged Aegis, their golden retriever. The dog lifted his head; Ennoia patted it perfunctorily, and he returned to his position of rest. Ennoia then gave Lucas a parting kiss, left the apartment, and headed off to catch the MAX for her forty-minute ride downtown.

As soon as she was gone, Lucas took her suggestion. In the bathroom, he turned on the shower, stripped off his clothes, put them in the hamper, and stepped into the falling water, allowing the warmth to flow over his body and wash away some of the tension in his neck, shoulders, and back. He stood there, clearing his mind as best as he could, until the hot water was gone, and when he finally turned the shower off, he felt refreshed. *Maybe I will work on some music today*, he told himself.

He grabbed a towel from the étagère and dried himself; then he stepped out of the shower, hung up his towel, and stood before the foggy mirror. He grabbed a hand towel from the counter, wiped away the condensation from the glass, and examined his reflection to determine if he really needed to spend time and effort shaving. The hazel eyes in the mirror seemed to examine him in return, and for a brief moment, he had the uncomfortable feeling that his entire life was under scrutiny. He forced himself to scoff at the thought, and he decided that his sand-colored stubble wasn't yet thick enough to warrant the razor; so, he bothered with nothing more than brushing his teeth and combing his mop of hair before he went to the bedroom to dress.

He managed to find in his dresser a pair of jeans with no holes, which he matched with a blue flannel shirt from the closet. He finished off the outfit with the same worn Doc Martens and tattered corduroy jacket he had worn the previous day. They were the only shoes and coat he owned, and they had definitely seen better days, but they still managed to protect him from the cold and the wet of the Pacific Northwest, and so he continued to wear them, unable to justify to himself the expenditure of money required to purchase replacements.

Once fully dressed, Lucas glanced at the corner of the bedroom, where his guitar was propped, in its case, against the wall. He recalled his wife's words and considered her suggestion. It had been some months since he had last written anything new—either lyrics or music—and he admitted he really should remedy that, exercise his creativity, and try to come up with something new.

First, a walk with Aegis, he told himself. Ennoia would, of course, have taken the dog outside first thing in the morning, to let him do his business after a full night inside, but Aegis expected a morning walk, as well, and it was Lucas' job to accompany him. He walked to the front door. Aegis stood, knowing full well that it was time for their daily exercise routine; his tongue lolled from the side of his mouth in delighted anticipation. Lucas took the leash from hook on the wall and fastened it to Aegis' collar, and then rubbed the dog lovingly on the head, saying, "Okay, boy, are you ready to head on out?"

Aegis pulled in his tongue, stared up at the man with his big brown eyes, and let out a short, sharp bark, which Lucas clearly understood as meaning, "Of course."

"All right, then; let's go."

There had been no new snowfall since the previous morning, but yesterday's deposit still blanketed the ground in the Rockwood area of Portland, Oregon, where Lucas lived. The sky was clear and the sun shone down unobscured, but the air was frigid nevertheless, too cold to allow the snow to melt. Winter was not Lucas' favorite season—he preferred the rains of spring and fall—but the brisk walk through the brisk weather energized him, and by the time he returned home, he was feeling somewhat uplifted and ready to devote himself to his work.

Unfortunately, the creativity refused to flow. He sat on the edge of the bed with his guitar propped on one leg, plucking at its strings, and he found himself at first just playing random chords and then, some minutes later, moving onto the

familiar songs he usually performed in public. After a while, he had progressed to playing some of the works he had composed himself, hoping they would spark an idea, but by the time two hours had passed without anything new to show for it, he had become disheartened, and the music had degenerated into the repetition of simple blues riffs.

“Damn it,” he swore. He felt like giving up and flinging his guitar out the nearby window, but, of course, he would not do that—not with any guitar, and certainly not with his custom Breedlove Master Class A15; it was the third most treasured thing in his life, after Ennoia and Aegis—and it had cost five thousand dollars, besides. Instead of throwing it, he placed it gently back into its case and returned it to the corner of the bedroom.

He picked up his jacket, which he had earlier laid beside him, put it on, and shuffled to the front door, intent on heading downtown for a drink or two at the Jolly Beggar. He had just opened the door when a thought struck him, and he went back to the bedroom and retrieved from his nightstand a notepad, on the off chance that inspiration did decide to descend upon him and he found the need to jot down lyrics.

It turned out that the notepad was unnecessary. Lucas had consumed four pints in as many hours at the bar and had produced nothing of substance.

“It’s hopeless,” he told Michael, when the cook walked by and asked Lucas how the work was going. “I’m sitting here trying to think of something that people will want to listen to, but I just can’t get anything written.”

“Well,” said Michael, “that’s your problem right there. You’re trying too hard to cater to an audience. I’ve heard the stuff you usually write. It *is* the kind of stuff people want to listen to—because it speaks to them. It has something to say.”

“No. I’m not gonna share my personal thoughts with perfect strangers. I suppose all I need is a catchy tune, and it doesn’t really matter what I write.”

“It matters to you,” said Michael, “or you’d have a notebook full of mediocre songs right now.”

Michael clapped a firm hand on Lucas’ shoulder and headed off to watch TV while waiting for an order to come his way.

Lucas grumbled lowly and muttered to himself, “I’m not gonna make any money this way.” He looked up at the clock. It was almost seven. Behind him, people were already taking their seats for the Wednesday night poker tournament. “I’d better grab a chair now, before they fill up.”

Lucas walked over to the table, found one of four empty chairs, and claimed it as his own.

Within minutes, three more of the chairs were occupied, leaving only one empty seat next to Lucas when the clock finally displayed seven on the dot. Lucas looked around to see if anyone else were headed toward the table, for the tournament would not begin until all nine seats had been taken. He was dismayed to see the well-dressed figure of the man known only as Simon striding confidently toward the table to claim the final seat.

“You don’t look happy to see me, Mr. Ferritor,” said Simon, his tone heavy with false sadness.

“Frankly, no.”

“Why is that?” Simon wondered as he sat down.

“Because I can’t possibly win against an opponent such as yourself.”

“Why, whatever do you mean?”

“I mean, you ch—” Lucas cut himself short, remembering Simon’s admonition against the accusation. “That is, you make your own luck—some very amazing, very...questionable...luck.”

Simon smiled. “It’s all a matter of will, Mr. Ferritor.”

Miranda cleared her throat. “If you guys don’t mind, let’s get started.”

“Of course,” said Simon, and the game began.

Lucas’ prediction came true. He did not win. Nor did he

even place second, as he had the night before. He came in third, though, and so he won the hundred-dollar prize, managing to break even for the night.

Unlike the other players who failed to make it into the top two, Lucas had stayed near the table to watch the game through to its conclusion. After the second-place winner left, Lucas approached Simon.

“What—you’re not gonna give him an all-or-nothing deal?”

“He did not seem as desperate as you, Mr. Ferritor.”

“Yeah, well I’m still desperate,” proclaimed Lucas. “I didn’t win a thing tonight. Care to make another wager—on my terms this time?”

Simon smiled pitifully. “Perhaps I was wrong about you. Perhaps money is all that matters in your mind.”

“You’re wrong,” said Simon. “It’s not money that matters to me. It’s what money can buy. Food, shelter, that sorta thing.”

“Can your five hundred dollars not buy that?”

“It’s not enough.”

“It’s better than nothing—which is what you will have if I win.”

“I’m confident you won’t.”

“Faith again, Mr. Ferritor? I’ll not argue against faith. I do not number myself among those who call themselves Christians, but I agree with their St. Paul that faith is one of the greatest virtues a person can possess. Temperance is also a virtue—a Platonic one, not Biblical, but no less a virtue for that. You have hardly been temperate with your beverages this night, Mr. Ferritor—four vodka and tonics just while I’ve been here, and how much to drink before that? I have serious doubts that you are thinking rationally. Still, if you truly wish to make the wager, I will accept.”

“I haven’t told you what it is.”

“No,” said Simon. “You have not. Still, I will accept.”

“Really? Well, in that case, I have an even better idea than the one I’d first planned.” He took the five hundred dollars from his wallet, leaving only a twenty still inside.

From her seat behind the table, Miranda interjected, “Lu-

cas, hey—I don't think this is the best idea."

"Thanks for your concern," said Lucas, "but I'm sure I'm gonna win. Can I have a fresh deck of cards?"

Miranda sighed. "It's a good thing for you guys these things aren't all that expensive—and that I'm insatiably curious." She gave Lucas an unopened pack of cards, still wrapped in plastic.

Lucas held them in front of Simon. "I'm going to open these cards. I'm going to shuffle them and lay them out. Okay? Then, I'm going to direct you to pick a specific card, and you're going to point to your choice. At no time do you get to touch the deck. Got it?"

"Sounds simple enough," said Simon.

Lucas opened the pack, withdrew the cards, tossed down the jokers face up on the table, and shuffled the remainder of the deck three times. Then he fanned them out so that their faces couldn't be seen.

He gazed into Simon's dark eyes. The man radiated confidence, but Lucas was not at all perturbed.

"You think you can do it?"

Simon nodded.

"Nope," said Lucas. "Ain't gonna happen. 'Cause what I want ya to do, see, is pick a joker outta that deck." He looked at Miranda and winked. "See?" he said to her, "I told ya I was gonna win."

Simon stretched forth his hand.

"Ah. No touching now, remember? Hell, why are you even bothering?"

Simon pointed to a card in the middle of the fan, his finger hovering just above it. "Just flip over my selection, please, Mr. Ferritor."

Lucas laughed, but he flipped over the card anyway.

It was a joker.

"What the hell?!" exclaimed Lucas, loudly enough to draw the attention of nearby patrons. He looked to make sure the two jokers he had discarded were still in their place. They were. "What the hell?" he said again, somewhat more quietly this time.

Simon picked up the bills Lucas had placed on the table and put them in his wallet. Lucas seemed not to notice; he was still staring at the cards.

“That can’t be,” he said.

“But it is.” Simon retorted.

Lucas flipped over the fan of cards, so that they all were face up. As had happened the night before, they all displayed the same design; only, this time it was the joker, rather than the ace of spades.

“Whoa,” said Miranda. “You’re like David Blaine or something—some kind of magician, right?”

“Some kinda cheater’s more like it,” said Lucas.

Simon tensed, and his face grew grim. He looked Lucas square in the eyes, and his gaze was harsh. He spoke, and his voice was firm. “And you, Mr. Ferritor, are thrice the fool.

“First, you have squandered your money—your precious money that would have been better spent on food and shelter, as you yourself said; you bet on a wager you *could not win*, because your faith, as virtuous as it is, is blind, as you, sir, are blind to many things.

“Second, in your blindness, you have misjudged me; I am no cheater, but a teacher. You have chosen not to learn, and you have lost a second chance at mercy by incurring my wrath. You have disregarded my warnings—as you disregard so many things you are told—and accused me yet again of something that is untrue. For this, you will receive no leniency from me this evening; you have forfeited your money irrevocably.

“Third—and this is, perhaps, the most important, so listen carefully—you alone have chosen your blindness, Mr. Ferritor. You have the ability to see the truth; you see things as others do not. The first moment you laid eyes on me, you should have seen me for what I truly am—but even now, you remain ignorant. There are things around us—more things in heaven and on earth than are dreamt of in most philosophies—and you know this, but you deliberately blind yourself to them. And there is great potential within you, the power to change the world—yet you choose not to see this,

though others have pointed it out. If you stood on the edge of an abyss, you would refuse to see, for it would require you to confront your fears; you would rather believe there was solid earth before you and keep on walking, unprepared for what awaited when you fell.

“Take these cards, Mr. Ferritor.” Simon made a stack of the jokers and placed them in Lucas’ pocket. “Let them be a reminder.”

“Of what?” asked Lucas.

“Of all that I have tried to teach you and all the lessons you have yet to learn. We shall meet again, Mr. Ferritor, and when we do, I would that you might show me you have learned something, or you shall see just how mighty my wrath can be.”

“That sounds like a threat,” Lucas declared.

“Not a threat, sir, but a warning,” said Simon, and he departed, silently, with a steady and graceful gait.

“Well,” said Lucas, to no one in particular, though Miranda still sat in her seat nearby, “I’ve got twenty bucks left, and I think I need another drink.”

He left the poker table, walked over to the bar, and ordered a straight shot of vodka.

“All right,” said the bartender, Vicky, “but this is gonna have to be the last one. You don’t look like you can handle much more.”

“That’s fine,” said Lucas. “I’m gonna be leavin’ soon, anyway. My wife’ll be here—”

“Right about now,” came Ennoia’s voice from behind him.

“Yeah, right about now,” repeated Lucas, and he turned his head to smile at his wife. Then he faced forward again, placed four dollars on the bar, and took the drink Vicky had set before him. He drank it down in a single gulp and slammed the shot glass down on top of the money with a “Thanks.”

“So, Luke, is that a celebratory shot or your consolation prize?” wondered Ennoia.

“The latter,” he replied.

“No big win tonight?”

Lucas shook his head.

“Did you at least break even?”

Lucas shook his head again.

“Oh, honey,” said Ennoia, her tone more annoyed than sympathetic. “We can’t afford—”

“Let’s just go home,” said Lucas. “We’ll talk at home.”

Ennoia shook her head sadly and said, in a quiet voice, “Yeah. Okay. Let’s do that.” She grabbed Lucas’ hand and led him out the door and down the street to catch the MAX back home.

Lucas kept dozing, and so the ride home was silent. When the two arrived in Rockwood, they walked back to their apartment in the crisp night air, and although the walk took fewer than five minutes, the chill of the environment and the hurried movement were enough to sober Lucas up a little—to the point, at least, where he both remembered the words he and Ennoia had exchanged at the bar and hoped his wife would not bring up the subject again. She did, though, and prefacing his response with a deep sigh, Lucas recounted the tale of his second encounter with Simon.

When he finished, he waited with his head hung low for an outburst that never came. Ennoia stared for a moment, silent save for the sound of her rapid breath. Finally, she said in a low tone, “You promised.”

“It’s not the same,” Lucas said, defensively. “I didn’t accept a stupid bet. I made up my own—one that I couldn’t lose.”

“You did lose.”

“He cheated!”

“I don’t care about your excuses, Lucas. You lost five hundred dollars! How the hell are we going to pay our bills?”

“I don’t know; I’ll think of something.”

“You’ll think of something? You sure weren’t thinking when you blew all our money, were you?”

“I—I—I—”

“That’s it, Lucas. I can’t take it anymore. I want you out.”

“Wh-Wh—” Lucas stammered and paused to collect himself as best he could. He took a deep breath. “Whaddaya mean, out?”

“Gone, Lucas. I can’t deal with this anymore.”

“With what?”

“You. Your problems. The gambling and the drinking.”

“I gamble to make money. For you. For us. It usually works. And I drink—well, you know why I drink, En.” His voice grew quiet. “It’s to keep *them* away. The—the Invaders.”

Ennoia sighed. “There’s got to be a better way, Lucas. Medication, meditation, something. Your behavior is self-destructive. You’re killing yourself.”

“I’m dealing with life. You don’t know what it’s like to be me—”

“No, Lucas, I don’t. No one knows what it’s like to be someone else. But we all have problems. I have my own, and I know from experience that confronting them is the surest way to overcome them.”

“I don’t have that kind of strength, En. How many years have we been together? You know that. You’ve been here for me for all this time. You’ve given me the strength I need. How can you just send me packing now?”

“You’re right, Lucas. I have been your strength. But I can’t shield you forever. You have to learn to deal with your problems yourself. You can’t run forever. You can’t hide from them.” She paused, waiting to see if Lucas had a response to that, but when he remained silent as well, she continued. “I’m sorry, Lucas. I don’t want a divorce, okay? I just want you to get yourself together. When you can show me you’ve done that, then we can see where our relationship goes from there. Figure out how to deal with whatever it is that you see when you aren’t drinking. Maybe you’ll find some other way to block them out. Maybe you’ll learn to live with them. Maybe you’ll even find out that your ability is a blessing rather than a curse. I don’t know. It’s up to you and you alone.”

Lucas looked stunned. Ennoia was obviously serious. “Where am I gonna go?” he asked. “What am I gonna do?”

Tears flowed from his eyes, in single droplets at first, and then in a steady stream.

Ennoia gave him a pitiful look. “That’s up to you, Luke. Do what you have to do. Figure it out. For you. For us.”

“What will you do? You can’t afford the bills by yourself.”

Ennoia scoffed. “We can’t afford the bills together—not with you wasting money on cards and alcohol.” She waited a moment and then said, with just a tinge of sympathy in her voice, “Stay here tonight; get yourself sober. But by the time I get home from work tomorrow, I want you gone. Take what you can—your guitar, Aegis, some clothes and stuff—and don’t worry about what you leave. I’ll take care of it for you.”

“I—”

“Don’t say anything, Luke. Just go to bed. Tomorrow, you can figure it out. Maybe Michael will let you stay with him. I don’t know. I just know that this is for the best right now, okay? Get out there and confront your problems—all of them.” Tears began to flow from Ennoia’s eyes now. “Or keep drinking, keep wasting your talent, keep doing what you’re doing and kill yourself, if you insist. But remember what John Donne said: No man is an island. No one dies alone; they always take at least a little piece—sometimes more—of someone else with them. If the bell tolls for you, Lucas, it tolls for others, as well. There are people who rely on you, people who care for you. There are people who can be touched—who need to be touched—by what you have to say and what you can do, whether you know it or not. That’s all I have to say. I want you to think about it.”

Lucas nodded. Then he took his wife’s advice and went to bed, hoping he would wake in the morning to find that the past few hours had all been a horrible dream.

Three days later, Lucas was still hoping the nightmare situation he had found himself thrust into was a fabrication of his mind.

Following Ennoia’s suggestion, Lucas had tried to approach Michael about staying with him—but all attempts to

contact him had failed. His employers at the Jolly Beggar said they knew only that Michael had been called away to deal with an emergency, which they assumed had to do with family. Lucas was, for the most part, a loner, and Michael was the only close friend he had; so, he found himself expelled from his apartment, bereft of his wife, and without a place to stay—homeless in the truest sense of the word. He took some small comfort in the fact that he had with him his guitar, a few changes of clothing, a debit card with access to the two hundred dollars in his bank account, and—perhaps most importantly—Aegis, who accompanied him in his desolation.

It was in this state that he found himself at ten o'clock on a Saturday night wandering the streets of downtown Portland with an unsteady gait. Many people were just beginning their night, and the city resounded with the noise of pedestrians and motor vehicles. Snow fell heavily from the darkness above, leaving a fresh blanket on the ground, into which Lucas felt—indeed, at the moment, hoped—he might sink, never to be seen again. With gloved hands, he held his old, ragged jacket close to his body, but he shivered nonetheless in the chilly night. At his heel, Aegis seemed to be faring slightly better; the dog's thick fur served as an efficient barrier against the cold, and Lucas envied him.

"Maybe I should have had a few more shots, eh, boy? Warmed myself up a bit more?"

Aegis barked a short, sharp response, and Lucas nodded. The truth was, he'd wanted to drink more, but he had forced himself—with much difficulty—to be responsible, try to save what little money he had. Already, he could feel the effects of the two beers he'd consumed fading away—and not just in the fact that he could feel the sting of the cold night air. No, he could also feel the presence of the Invaders around him. Soon, he knew, he would be sober enough to see them whipping around in the darkness, battling each other, seeking living souls to feed upon. Whatever it was that the liquor did to numb that sense was rapidly waning.

Not that it mattered whether he could see them or not; he

knew they were there, all around him. They were there, and that's what mattered. He tried to stay close to the artificial lights that dotted the city—streetlamps, Christmas decorations, anything else—anything that would serve as a ward and keep them away. Light was the only thing that could shield him from their onslaught. Rather, it was one of two things, for it was not only in the presence of light that he felt safe, but also in the presence of Ennoia. He wasn't sure why or how, but she had kept him safe throughout these past few years, had kept him sane. But now, she had cast him out, and the wall of sanity she had helped him build threatened to crumble around him and let the violent, chaotic darkness assault him, consume his very soul.

The thought brought tears to his eyes, and he collapsed to his haunches, propping himself up with his back against the brick wall of some building he was sure he would recognize were he in a more rational state of mind.

Sitting there, with Aegis curled up next to him in the snow, Lucas watched the men and women as they went about their post-revelry affairs. They milled about, alone or in groups, some heading for their cars, others down the sidewalk, still others not going anywhere at all, but remaining outside the doors of the bars. The noise of their conversations filled the night, and Lucas' head began to throb. He closed his eyes, but only briefly, for it made him nauseated. He opened his eyes to relieve himself of the feeling, but it did little good; to be sure, his stomach stilled and he no longer felt as though he were spinning, but the headache persisted, and he could swear now that he saw shadows darting through the air in the realm of his peripheral vision, beyond the luminescence emitted from the streetlamp above.

Back and forth, up and down, round and round they darted, in no pattern his mind could discern, waiting hungrily for unsuspecting individuals to leave the light and enter the realm of darkness, where they thrived. He watched them, unable to pry his eyes away from the chaotic motion.

He could hear their screeching—loud, like the sirens of a fleet of fire engines rushing down a busy street—and he

wondered why it did not draw the attention of the others who were there with him outside. Before long, the answer became clear. The cacophonous screeching of the darting shadows blended with the boisterous commotion of the men and women in the streets, as though they were point and counterpoint in some strangely enticing demon-song. The noise became music of a sort, and as he watched the disordered dance of the Invaders, he noticed that the people on the sidewalks became shadows at the edges of his vision. In a moment of insight, realization dawned. The people who swarmed around the sidewalks—they were just like the Invaders; they, too, were shadow creatures, inhabitants of the darkness. They were not evil, but they were shadows nonetheless—dark and empty. They were the Invaders' kindred. From them, Lucas knew, he had to escape.

Reacting without thought, Lucas sprang to his feet and ran as quickly as he could down the snow-covered sidewalk. Aegis followed, as he was trained to do. Before long, the dog began barking. Lucas, caught up in the noise of the shadow creatures only he could see and hear, barely registered the sound. He continued his dash forward and was off the sidewalk and in the street before he realized he had leapt into the path of an oncoming car. It took only a moment for him to realize what he had done, just as Aegis' barks finally reached his ears clearly. His mind interpreted the sounds as words both of warning and of fear. "No! Stop! Stop!" But it was too late to move out of the way, just as it was too late for the car to stop. Lucas cringed, braced himself for his final moment of life. He heard again a shout from behind him. The voice was familiar, but it came not from the dog.

"Stop!" it said, and the world complied.

Around him, Lucas saw that everything had come to a halt. The car was motionless mere inches from his body. The streets were silent and devoid of human activity. Even the snowflakes had stopped falling, now suspended in the air. He knew it was impossible, but somehow it had happened; the evidence was displayed right before his eyes. There, all around him, time stood still.