

The Soul Shepherd and the Threshold

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Chapter 1

Twilight had unfurled its cloak when Michael appeared that Friday. Yet the gathering darkness didn't offer relief from the summer heat. Not to the children playing road hockey or to the runners pushing for another lap.

Until Michael sped past them. His presence sent them shivering as if winter had suddenly stolen in, causing their breaths to come out in vapors and their arms to prickle with goose bumps. He could've gotten to the Jameses' house through his usual route, but the detour allowed him to scout the neighborhood.

He looked over his shoulder. "Good," he muttered. No sign of his kind or of the other. Doubling his steps, he finally reached his destination.

"You're late." Thirteen-year-old Noah crossed his arms as he stood at the top of the stairs inside the house.

"Hello, Noah." *Young, much too young*, Michael thought as he waited for Noah's invitation. But his kind never questioned. They went where they were told to go and summoned whom they were told to summon.

Noah kicked the soccer ball, sending it bouncing two steps at a time—the sound of rubber hitting hardwood floors echoing in a still-empty house—until it settled on a tread halfway down.

"Okay, hurry up." Noah waved him in. "Mr. Hockey Captain will be home soon, and you know he doesn't care about my band." But Michael had barely taken a step when his forehead creased. "What's that?"

Bells, like those in ancient churches, tolled.

There was no ancient church in this Toronto neighborhood. Just rows of identical two-story brick homes with their two-car garages and modest lawns.

Michael's kind listened for signs—tolling of bells, for instance—on day four, on day nine, on day forty, and finally on the first anniversary. Today, the fourth day, the tolling reached four counts.

When it stopped, the crease on Noah's forehead disappeared. "Which band did you say you played in before?" he said, twirling an imaginary drumstick in one hand.

Michael had never played in a band. Yet four days ago it was the persona Noah had conjured for him. Maybe it was his dark, unruly hair. Or his grim face. Both common features of musicians who were photographed in Noah's magazines.

Noah didn't wait for an answer. Instead he turned around and disappeared into his room.

Dust that had accumulated on the hardwood floor and on the banister swirled like miniature sandstorms as Michael glided up to Noah's room.

Noah's family—Mr. James and Mrs. James, sixteen-year-old brother Peter, and twin sister Emma—still lived here. But the house's state of neglect—floors that hadn't been mopped, piles of garbage that hadn't been brought out, grass that hadn't been cut—betrayed their state of mind.

Noah's room was the only part of the house that his family had kept spotless, as if they expected its owner to walk through the door and surprise them with his usual pranks. His laptop was switched off, resting next to music sheets that were neatly arranged on the study table. Posters of his drummer idols stared at the four-piece drum set from their lofty perches above the bed's headboard.

Noah walked over to the corner of his room where a classic guitar beckoned. "You look way too old for my band." He frowned as he gave Michael an appraising look. "Aren't you supposed to be in university?"

Michael shrugged. Just then the sound of a car backing into the driveway made him run to the window.

"It's Mom and Dad," Noah said while his eyes darted from one corner of the room to another, seemingly figuring out whether he should be here.

The car's back door swung open just as the car parked.

Emma was the first to climb out. Like Noah, she had chestnut-brown hair and dark gray eyes she got from their father and exactly three freckles on the nose tip just like their mother. Her nose was red, and her

eyes were puffy. Against the blackness of her dress, her pale face appeared even paler.

Peter followed without a word. With green eyes and copper hair, he looked very much like their mother, minus the freckles on the nose. Just like their father, he was tall, had long arms and a lean frame. This particular Friday, he'd traded his ice hockey captain jersey for a black suit and his ice skates for dress shoes.

"Daniel, you promised," Mrs. James said, not budging from the passenger seat.

"Humph!" Emma ground her teeth as Mr. James revved the engine in response.

Peter strode to the front door, fumbled with the key for a second, then shoved the door as if he were bodychecking an opponent.

"Can you believe them?" Emma said, flying past Peter.

But Peter appeared not to hear her. Through the wall, Michael saw him dash upstairs and pause only long enough to pick up the soccer ball and hurl it down. Once inside his room next door, he kicked a hockey bag like it was the opposing team's player sprawled on the ice.

"What's going on?" Noah peered through the window.

Michael leaned his forehead on the glass pane and studied the boy from the corner of his eye.

Noah had kept his hair long—past his ears but not quite touching his shoulders and with bangs that fell over his eyes. The drummer look, Noah himself had called it. He had an average build and would blend in a crowd except for his drummer's hair.

Michael wondered if he should tell him now. But a voice inside counseled patience.

Outside, Mrs. James pleaded with Mr. James. "You promised. The kids need you, especially tonight."

"I'm going back," Mr. James said.

"Back there? It's getting dark."

Mr. James grunted.

"Daniel..."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Remember that you still have two kids."

Mr. James grunted again.

Mrs. James sighed then placed a hand on his arm just as he put the gears in reverse. “Just don’t stay out too late, okay?”

“Not again.” Noah groaned, watching his father race the car and leave skid marks on the driveway. “Ems.”

Michael blocked his path. “Emma needs to be alone.”

Noah’s brows shot up as if to say Michael couldn’t possibly know what Emma wanted. “Their fights upset Ems,” Noah explained. “I don’t know what’s gotten into them these days. Mom nags, and Dad... Dad just grunts like he’s lost his tongue. I tell them to keep it down so Ems won’t hear, but they just ignore me. Like I’m invisible or something.”

And, not or, a part of Michael nagged at him. *Then make the boy learn it on his own,* another part of him insisted. So he stepped aside and watched Noah sprint down to the living room.

“What’s up with you?” Noah plopped on the chair near the couch where Emma was curled up. He eyed her black dress and black stockings suspiciously. “Don’t you have soccer practice?”

As if in response, Emma switched on the TV above the fireplace mantel, at the same time Mrs. James marched through the door and headed to the home office situated between the living room and the dining area.

From where he stood at the foot of the stairs, Michael watched as the large TV screen came to life. It projected what appeared to be a quiz show with its silver-haired quizmaster and three contestants. The program seemed to be recorded because Emma kept pressing the remote control’s fast-forward button until she got to the part she liked.

The quizmaster acknowledged each contestant then read from his card. “It makes up approximately sixty-eight percent of the universe and is believed to be the force behind the acceleration of the universe’s expansion.”

“Dark energy,” Emma said.

“Of course, Miss Physics Protégée,” Noah said.

“Dark energy,” one of the contestants answered.

“That’s correct,” the quizmaster said.

Emma clapped. “Yes!” She clicked the forward button again and turned up the volume.

“It is known to be memory loss of a specific event,” the quizmaster said.

“Selective amnesia,” Emma said.

Noah squinted at her. “How did you know that? Did you ‘borrow’ Great-aunt Brun’s books again?”

“Anyone?” the quizmaster said when none of the contestants rang the buzzer.

“Selective amnesia,” Emma said again.

“The answer is lacunar amnesia,” the quizmaster said.

“What?” Emma jumped up and pointed the remote control at the quizmaster like she was wielding a dagger. “No way!”

“Keep it down, young lady.” It was Mrs. James, who poked her head from behind the pocket door of her home office.

“Uh-huh.” Emma nodded. But as soon as the pocket door closed, she pressed the fast-forward button and not the volume, then perched on the couch’s armrest.

“Oh, you’ll get in trouble, Ems,” Noah said.

“Are you kidding me?” Emma said.

“No, I’m not.” Noah raised both hands. “Mom just told you to keep it down.”

But Emma wasn’t looking at him. Instead, she glared at Peter, who was rushing downstairs. “Really?” She pressed the pause button and waved the remote control at him—at his running shoes and pants, at his armband, which secured his mobile phone, and the white earbuds plugged in his ears. “Have you forgotten what today is?”

Peter glanced pointedly at the TV screen before facing off with her. “Have you?”

“It’s not the same.”

“How’s it not the same?”

“What’s today?” Noah looked from Emma to Peter.

Peter unplugged the earbuds. “It’s still about No—”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Emma said.

“You can’t—”

“I can’t? You’re telling me what I can and can’t do? Look at you.”

“Me? I’m not—”

“Of course you’re not. You’re not the one to miss your runs, or your precious hockey games, are you? You think you can forget him when you’re out there running or skating or scoring?”

Noah sprang from the chair. “Him? Who’s him? What are you talking about?”

“Enough, you two!” Mrs. James stepped out from the home office.

“I didn’t start it,” Peter said.

“Of course you did. Mom, he did. Look at him,” Emma said.

“I wasn’t the one telling you what to do,” Peter said.

“I said, ENOUGH!”

BANG! The office door slammed shut, and Mrs. James disappeared inside.

Peter stared at the door, his face and ears turning redder by the second.

“Peter...” Emma reached out for her brother’s hand.

“Don’t.” Peter marched off without a backward glance.

BANG! This time it was the front door that slammed shut behind Peter.

Emma pressed play and sank back on the couch.

“What’s gotten into you?” Noah looked as if he wanted to shake her. When she just bit her lower lip, he walked over to the foot of the stairs, picked up the soccer ball, and lobbed it at her. “Go play some soccer. That’ll cool you off.”

But Emma stiffened as soon as the ball landed on her lap. “M-Mom, it’s Noah *again*,” she said in a trembling voice.

The office remained closed.

Perhaps realizing she wouldn’t get sympathy from Mrs. James, Emma hurled it unwittingly toward Noah. “Leave me alone!” Then she vaulted for the front door.

Emma was already two houses down when Michael and Noah caught up with her.

“You think my family’s weird,” Noah said with knitted brows. “I bet yours is much better, no fighting and shouting and all.”

Noah’s remark brought Michael to a halt. He had no family, at least not anyone he remembered. His families were those of his charges, and their stories became his too. “Not entirely,” he said, more to himself as vague images teased his memory.

The children Michael had passed by earlier had long dispersed to their homes. Even the runners were gone. There was only an elderly woman and her guide dog that Emma almost knocked down as she rounded the corner.

“Why are you in such a hurry, child?” the elderly woman said, steadying herself as she peered at Emma.

“Sorry, ma’am. I was just—”

“Is he bothering you?” the woman said. She was maybe ninety years old and must be legally blind to have the need for a Seeing Eye dog. But she stared straight at Michael as if she had recovered the twenty-twenty vision of her youth. She gasped when she looked into his eyes, which weren’t blue or green or brown.

Crab Nebula. I see you through your Crab Nebula eyes, came a faint echo from Michael’s past.

Emma looked over her shoulders. “Oh, no, ma’am. It’s only my friend, Dray.” Suddenly she seemed shy, twirling her braided hair and smoothing her dress before waving to the boy in front of the Jameses’ driveway.

The boy, Dray, kneeled as if he was retying his shoelace. But he jerked at the sound of his name, his dreadlocks bouncing on his dark-skinned shoulders. He acknowledged Emma with a nod before glancing at the Jameses’ house. Then he stood up, dusted himself off, and hurried toward the opposite direction without a word.

But while Dray was silent, the elderly woman’s guide dog was loud. It howled and strained from its leash to lunge at Noah and Michael.

“Hush, boy.” The woman yanked at the leash as if that would calm the dog. “He’s a friend.”

Emma looked from the woman, who continued to stare at Michael, then to the dog, and finally to Dray who had now disappeared around the street corner. “Sorry again, ma’am. Good night.” And then she took off.

“Quick,” Noah said, making a step to follow her.

But the gesture angered the dog even more, causing it to foam at the mouth. It and other neighborhood dogs erupted in a chorus of howls.

Noah retreated in surprise. “What’s wrong with them?”

“It’s in their nature to react that way whenever our kind is around,” Michael said. When Noah only frowned, he added, “Let’s go back.”

“I’m ready,” the elderly woman called after Michael.

Michael had come because Noah bore the mark—a pale shimmering glow which enveloped the boy from head to toe, like a veil of mist rising from the lake at early dawn.

He turned to the woman, who didn’t bear the mark. “Not today, ma’am. I didn’t come for you today.”
