

“Leon?” Joshua asked again, coming up to his side. “You rang mom and asked me to meet you here?”

Leon never turned from the door. “No,” he said, his voice that same hollow tone as his mom’s.

Joshua gazed at the doorbell with the name tag inside it. His tears beginning to dry on his face. The name had been changed from DEBNAR to DREAM SORCERER.

He pushed against the door. It opened in a whisper, as he’d known it would.

*Skittery-scratch scratchy-scratch...*

The sound immediately drifted out from the interior. He’d known that this would be the case as well.

Moving into the pitch darkness of the hallway, he left the cacophony of madness and his friend, who continued peering into the house, wearing his tuxedo, finger at his lips in a ‘golly-gosh’ manner.

*Skittery-scratch scratchy-scratch...*

Assaulting his ears. Passively demanding. Needing his attention.

But Joshua wasn’t here to pay the man in black a visit. Not yet, anyway. His friend’s safety and whereabouts were the prime objective, and he suspected he knew where he could be found.

He walked further along the hallway’s near-impenetrable darkness. The brassy sunlight once more struggled to establish its presence before being entirely consumed.

Joshua knew Sammy’s house well, so even though he couldn’t see, he knew the alternative route to the stairwell was coming up. Taking the other route through the sofa room, where the man sat, was not the plan unless his friend could not be found. His heart rammed against the inside of his skull. Any second

now, his chest would explode as it slammed into his ribcage. Every vein in his body pulsed with painful intensity, his breathing coming in hot geysers.

He slowly made his way through the darkness. God, if he fell and hurt himself

*Skittery-scratch scratchy-scratch...*

the man in black would surely set upon him with those bottomless eyes wherever he came to grief.

Feeling his way up the staircase with one hand on the handrail, the other groping blindly in the darkness, and his feet testing each tread, one emitted a loud *creak*. He stopped cold and proceeded on only when sure nothing had joined him for closer inspection. It was said that when rock-climbing freehand, you should always have three points attached to ground. He maintained such a grip, lest he fall and become a bait-ball of a different sort.

He reached the top of the stairwell by the way the tread flattened into a wide expanse.

Again, that feeling of vulnerability. Always in t-shirt and shorts. He really should start taking to wearing jeans and long-sleeved shirts. Maybe a suit of armor and nuclear weapons would be of some use amongst the fray that was as dark as it was silent.

Nothing seemed to exist here except for that

*Skittery-scratch scratchy-scratch...*

And even that was fading, getting smaller, as if the man in black was rapidly moving away from him.

Well, at least there was something positive coming out of this.

Through this silence came a *squeak*.

Joshua's bladder let go.

A patch of muted light, tinged a shade of green, fell into the upstairs hallway at the far end. It was oblong in shape, the outline of an opened door. But what kind of light was burning behind it? Perhaps a green shade had been hung around the globe to make it look that way.

And what way was that?

Sickly, like bile.

Joshua didn't dare breathe. So he stood there in his wet shorts, urine freezing against his legs and in his shoes and socks.

Something was moving along the hallway, toward that oblong patch. He could make out no more than an apparition that slowly swayed from side to side, as if a large wind-up toy was swaying from one robotic leg to the other and way from him.

Had Leon somehow snuck around him? He was certain that he hadn't. Then again, his mind was chugging along like a wrecked train, all its passengers bloodied and dead, the apparition's definition becoming increasingly clear as it moved closer to the light, to hold up directly before it.

It was his friend, Sammy, and he maintained that shifting from one foot to the other as if enchanted by what he saw beyond. His hair was a little dishevelled, his clothes as untidy as usual, his face a petrified mask and highlighted in bile-green.

And, for a very brief transition in time, Joshua thought he could hear the sound of clocks.

He sharpened his senses so his ears hurt with strain, and all he got was the typical ringing that accompanied utter quietness, besides the gushing blood through his veins.

Maybe it was nothing. Besides, it wasn't important, was it?