



The Fallen 1: The Fallen and Leviathan

By Thomas E. Sniegowski

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CHAPTER ONE

Aaron Corbet was having the dream again.

Yet it was so much more than that.

Since they began, over three months before, the visions of sleep had grown more and more intense—more vivid. Almost real.

He is making his way through the primitive city, an ancient place constructed of brown brick, mud, and hay. The people here are in a panic, for something attacks their homes. They run about frenzied, their frightened cries echoing throughout the cool night. Sounds of violence fill the air, blades clanging together in battle, the moans of the wounded—and something else he can't quite place, a strange sound in the distance, but moving closer.

Other nights he has tried to stop the frightened citizens, to catch their attention, to ask them what is happening, but they do not see or hear him. He is a ghost to their turmoil.

Husbands and wives, shielding small children between them, scramble across sand-covered streets desperately searching for shelter. Again he listens to their fear-filled voices. He does not understand their language, but the meaning is quite clear. Their lives and the lives of their children are in danger.

For nights too numerous to count he has come to this place, to this sad village and witnessed the panic of its people. But not once has he seen the source of their terror.

He moves through the winding streets of the dream place, feeling the roughness of desert sand beneath his bare feet. Every night this city under siege becomes more real to him, and tonight he feels its fear as if it were his own. And again he asks himself, fear of what? Who are they who can bring such terror to these simple people?

In the marketplace a boy dressed in rags, no older than he, darts out from beneath a tarp covering a large pile of yellow, gourdlike fruit. He watches the boy stealthily travel across the deserted market, sticking close to the shadows. The boy nervously watches the sky as he runs.

Odd that the boy would be so concerned with the sky overhead.

The boy stops at the edge of the market and crouches within a thick pool of night. He stares longingly across the expanse of open ground at another area of darkness on the other side.

There is unrelenting fear on the dark-skinned youth's face; his eyes are wide and white. What is he so afraid of? Aaron looks up himself and sees only the night, like velvet adorned with twinkling jewels. There is nothing to fear there, only beauty to admire.

The boy darts from his hiding place and scrambles across the open area. He is halfway there when the winds begin. Sudden, powerful gusts that come out of nowhere, hurling sand, dirt, and dust.

The boy stops short and shields his face from the scouring particles. He is blinded, unsure of his direction. Aaron wants to call to him, to help the boy escape the mysterious sandstorm, but knows that his attempts would be futile, that he is only an observer.

And there is the sound. He can't place it exactly, but knows it is familiar. There is something in the sky above—something that beats at the air, stirring the winds, creating the sudden storm.

The boy is screaming. His sweat-dampened body is powdered almost white in a sheen of fine dust and desert sand.

The sounds are louder now, closer.

What is that? The answer is right at the edge of his knowing. He again looks up into the sky. The sand still flies about, tossed by the winds. It stings his face and eyes, but he has to see—he has to know what makes these strange pounding sounds, what creates gusts of wind powerful enough to propel sand and rock. He has to know the source of such unbridled horror in these people of the dream-city—in this boy.

And through the clouds of fine debris, he sees them. For the first time he sees them.

They are wearing armor. Golden armor that glistens in the dancing light thrown from the flames of their weapons.

The boy runs toward him. It seems that Aaron is suddenly visible. The boy reaches out, pleading to be saved in the language of his people.

This time, he understands every word. He tries to answer, but earsplitting shrieks fill the night, the excited cries of predators that have discovered their prey.

The boy tries to run, but there are too many.

Aaron can do nothing but watch as the birdlike creatures descend from the sky, falling upon the boy, his plaintive screams of terror drowned out by the beating of powerful wings.

Angels' wings.

LYNN, MASSACHUSETTS

It was Gabriel's powerful, bed-shaking sneeze that pulled Aaron from the dream and back to the waking world.

Aaron's eyes snapped open as another explosion of moisture dappled his face. For the moment, the dream was forgotten and all that occupied his mind was the attentions of an eighty-pound Labrador retriever named Gabriel.

"Unnngh," he moaned as he pulled his arm up from the warmth beneath the covers to wipe away the newest spattering of dog spittle.

"Thanks, Gabe," he said, his voice husky from sleep.

"What time is it anyway? Time to get up?" he asked the dog lying beside him.

The yellow retriever leaned its blocky head forward to lick the back of his exposed hand, his muscular bulk blocking Aaron's view of the alarm clock.

"Okay, okay," Aaron said as he pulled his other hand out to ruffle the dog's velvety soft, golden-brown ears, and wiggled himself into an upright position to check the time.

Craving more attention, Gabriel flipped over onto his back and swatted at Aaron with his front paws. He chuckled and rubbed the dog's exposed belly before training his eyes on the clock on the nightstand beside

his bed.

Aaron watched the red digital readout change from 7:28 to 7:29.

“Shit,” he hissed.

Sensing alarm in his master, Gabriel rolled from his back to his stomach with a rumbling bark.

Aaron struggled from the bed, whipped into a frenzy by the lateness of the hour.

“Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit,” he repeated as he pulled off his Dave Matthews concert T-shirt and threw it onto a pile of dirty clothes in the corner of the room. He pulled down his sweatpants and kicked them into the same general vicinity. He was late. Very late.

He’d been studying for Mr. Arslanian’s history exam last night, and his head was so crammed with minutiae about the Civil War that he must have forgotten to set the alarm. He had less than a half hour to get to Kenneth Curtis High School before first bell.

Aaron lunged for his dresser and yanked clean underwear and socks from the second drawer. In the mirror above, he could see Gabriel curiously staring at him from the bed.

“Man’s best friend, my butt,” he said to the dog on his way into the bathroom. “How could you let me oversleep?”

Gabriel just fell to his side among the tousled bedclothes and sighed heavily.

Aaron managed to shower, brush his teeth, and get dressed in a little more than seventeen minutes.

I might be able to pull this off yet, he thought as he bounded down the stairs, loaded bookbag slung over his shoulder. If he got out the door right at this moment and managed to make all the lights heading down North Common, he could probably pull into the parking lot just as the last bell rang.

It would be close, but it was the only option he had.

In the hallway he grabbed his jacket from the coatrack and was about to open the door when he felt Gabriel’s eyes upon him.

The dog stood behind him, watching him intensely, head cocked at a quizzical angle that said, “Haven’t you forgotten something?”

Aaron sighed. The dog needed to be fed and taken out to do his morning business. Normally he would have had more than enough time to see to his best friend’s needs, but today was another story.

“I can’t, Gabe,” he said as he turned the doorknob. “Lori will give you breakfast and take you out.”

And then it hit him. He’d been in such a hurry to get out of the house that he hadn’t noticed his foster mother’s absence.

“Lori?” he called as he stepped away from the door and quickly made his way down the hall to the kitchen. Gabriel followed close at his heels.

This is odd, he thought. Lori was usually the first to rise in the Stanley household. She would get up around

five A.M., get the coffee brewing, and make her husband, Tom, a bag lunch so he could be out of the house and to the General Electric plant where he was a foreman, by seven sharp.

The kitchen was empty, and with a hungry Gabriel by his side, Aaron made his way through the dining room to the living room.

The room was dark, the shades on the four windows still drawn. The television was on, but had gone to static. His seven-year-old foster brother, Stevie, sat before the twenty-two-inch screen, staring as if watching the most amazing television program ever produced.

Across the room, below a wall of family photos that had jokingly become known as the wall of shame, his foster mom was asleep in a leather recliner. Aaron was disturbed at how old she looked, slumped in the chair, wrapped in a worn, navy blue terry cloth robe. It was the first time he ever really thought about her growing older, and that there would be a day when she wouldn't be around anymore. *Where the hell did that come from?* he wondered. He pushed the strange and really depressing train of thought away and attempted to think of something more pleasant.

When the Stanleys had taken him into their home as a foster child, it had been his seventh placement since birth. What was it that the caseworkers used to say about him? "He's not a bad kid, just a bit of an introvert with a bad temper." Aaron smiled. He never expected the placements to...

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