

Nephilim: Chapter 1

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A darkened summer sky was illuminated by a sudden branch of lightning. The clouds, enormous black woollen balls pregnant with malice, look heavy enough to collapse on top of Lucas and crush him into oblivion. An explosion like a sonic boom made his heart skip a beat, startling his body into abrupt consciousness. Lucas gazed out the window of the back seat to the wan of the street lamps reflected off the wet asphalt. He allowed his forehead to rest on the glass and welcomed the resulting white noise from the pouring rain as it lashed at the vehicle from seemingly every angle; anything to distract him from the unrelenting despotism taking place in the front seat.

Drew's hands were clenched on the steering wheel like iron clamps; his white knuckles like mountain peaks standing out against taut flesh. Lucas couldn't see his face from where he sat but could imagine the spittle being ejected from his mouth as his berated his ever meek partner. Drew - a putrid, rotten excuse for a human being. The kind of person you would go out of your way to avoid. Forever stinking of cigarette smoke or cheap bourbon, sometimes both; he was as unpleasant as he was arrogant and never failed to let the good nature of others go unexploited. Everything about him screamed low-life, from his clothes to his constant self-victimisation. His sense of entitlement was outshone only by his delusions that the world was somehow out to get him.

Lucas humoured the thought, if only for a moment, of intervening. He'd say something clever or make a slight to draw Drew's attention. Drew would make him pay for it of course, and likely his mother too. On a good day Drew used to use Lucas and his older brother David as human ashtrays. Beatings were common practice and fighting back usually meant being locked up without food. David was always the one to fight back first out of the two. He never could tolerate Drew's ilk, and tried on more than a couple of occasions to get the authorities involved. Sad to say that never ended well for him. The back of Drew's hand struck like a hammer, his square-cut onyx ring forever eager to leave its throbbing mark. Sure enough other parents and teachers would notice the unmistakable signs of an abusive household, and sure enough nothing would ever change. Drew had a way of talking his way out of things, and on the rare occasion when that didn't work, well, lets just say that there were never any follow-up enquiries.

As brothers David and Lucas were always close; a household such as theirs demanded them to be, for the sake of survival if nothing else. David, being seven years Lucas' senior, made it his job to look out for his well-being - a responsibility he believed in with fierce conviction. David would constantly get himself into fights with the kids that used to

pick on Lucas. As he got older Lucas learned how to fight just to save David the trouble. For Lucas this meant growing accustomed to the occasional black eye - two after a particularly nasty scrimmage with a boy almost twice his age. Cuts and abrasions were commonplace, and more bruises than he could count. He didn't mind them much. Drew's punishments surpassed any damage a preschooler could dish out. He looked at his brother and hoped that he'd grow up to be just like him.

David was strong for his age, broad shouldered but with a slim build that made him light on his feet. The boy with the ash brown hair and honest face led a largely selfless life. Unusual perhaps that he preferred his solitude, and as such didn't keep the company of many friends. He confided instead in his brother about his ambitions and dreams, places he wanted to see and people he wanted to meet. He was optimistic about the future, and was one of those people that liked to think of the glass as half full. Lucas couldn't work out how he had worked two jobs, kept up appearances at school, and still managed to find the time to run his errands. He had guessed that he simply wanted to prove to himself that he was capable enough to make it on his own. Drew loved to remind them that they'd be nothing without him, though ironically his attempts to break their spirits only resolved to bolster David's determination. Lucas on the other hand did his best to ignore him.

David was gone now though, and his departure had left Lucas with a deep wound that never seemed to heal. Two more years he told himself. Two more years and then he'd leave for good. He'd dreamt that he'd find a way to free his mother from that tyrant, though sometimes he wasn't sure if she could ever bring herself to leave, and that saddened him to his core. His mother Diane had a difficult past and habitually clung to anything in her life that was remotely consistent. She craved that fleeting sense of stability you got when everything else in your life is in shambles. Drew had become that for her and more.

Drew left a substantial amount to be desired in a real father figure, and Lucas often thought about meeting his biological father and what that would be like. He'd known from David that they had different fathers. David would tell him stories from when he was younger about his dad, and what few memories he could share Lucas embraced as if they were his own. David's father had gotten sick before Lucas' had entered the picture, withering away to nothing in a hospital bed without even the luxury of living out his last moments on his own terms. Lucas couldn't think of a more awful way to pass. He had decided that there was no dignity in dying no matter how you went.

David never had the chance to meet Lucas' father either. He had entered Diane's life as quickly as he had left, like a passing breeze in the dead of night. She never spoke of him and that suited Lucas fine. As a boy he made up heroic reasons why his father had to leave, that he was somehow brave and that it was for the greater good. Now he thought only of him as a coward, he hoped he felt like one too. Lucas resented him for leaving and blamed him for the Drew situation. At times he imagined reasons why he might have left, even understood, but he easily buried those feelings beneath a landslide of pain and rancour. Still if it came to it he knew he would hear him out, he was his father after all, and truthfully anyone would be better than the man that now presided over his life.

The car lurched as Drew sped up to meet the tail-end of an amber traffic light. Lucas ignored him, allowing his mind the rare respite. He missed his brother every day since the night of the fire. People claimed it was a miracle that Lucas had escaped unscathed. He couldn't remember much or even how the blaze started, only that it raged with a sudden intensity, engulfing his childhood home in what felt like a matter of seconds. The smell he recalled most clearly – fetid and overpowering. For weeks the stench of burnt plastic and rubber lingered in his nostrils. Lucas had watched from the street as fire licked at the air from various openings, as though a fire-breathing dragon dwelled within. By the time firefighters had arrived the flames were everywhere, the house a raging inferno.

Screams rose above the sound of the fire's roar. Lucas' legs unfroze and he felt them moving below him without his mind willing them; towards the house, faster than ever before. Darkness formed at the corners of his vision. Blurred shades of yellow, orange and red moved unfettered as they lapped at the air searching hungrily for something to ignite. Lucas moved faster, faster, until he could no longer feel the ground beneath his feet. His vision twisted away from the flames, unwillingly, in the enormous arms of a firefighter. The yellow giant's arms remained locked around his waist, even as he flailed, kicking and punching at the air. When his limbs had given out and his breath came only in short unsteady gasps he realised the screaming had stopped - he realised he was the one screaming.

That night he learned how truly cruel the world could be. Even now as he sat in the stinking cesspit of Drew's car, six years the boy with the dead older brother, still he saw the blurred shades of yellow, orange and red. He wasn't sad, he was angry, and he knew deep down that he would always be angry; he had made his peace with it.

The quiet was what brought Lucas' thoughts back into the car. Drew had apparently run out of breath. Lucas savoured the silence; he knew it wasn't likely to last. Diane had angled her trembling body towards the window. Her shoulder-length yellow hair retained none of the former lustre Lucas recalled from his childhood. What was once soft and flowing was now dishevelled with split ends. It spoke for the rest of her. Lucas glimpsed a reflection of her sombre appearance in the glass. Her sharp features and well-defined jawline alluded to what was once a beautiful face. The dark circles beneath her deep seated eyes told the story of sleep deprivation and secret tears in the dead of night. Lucas pitied her. Not for letting herself fall into a loveless relationship with a man who would never respect her, but because she genuinely believed this was all she would ever amount to – a servant to the whims of her oppressor.

Traffic slowed and Drew let out a frustrated sigh. From the corner of his eye a flickering street lamp tugged at Lucas' attention. The lamp flickered once, and then thrice, and then there was a figure, hooded and cloaked, standing in the pale glow. Lucas checked his vision – no, there was definitely someone standing there who hadn't been a moment before. Lucas sat forward. The rain obscured his vision but he could make out something concealed in the sleeve of the cloak. His breath got caught in his throat when the headlights of a turning car gleamed off metal and he realised what he was looking at was a long, crescent shaped blade.

"What the – ", Lucas murmured.

The events that followed came without pause or warning. Suddenly the lamp burst raining sparks down on the sidewalk. The figure vanished as if absorbed by the darkness. Overhead lightning struck so close it brought with it thunder which cracked like a thousand whips. Lucas' heart jumped in his chest, his ears ringing. Drew cursed and swerved to avoid rear ending the vehicle in front which had come to a screeching halt. The car shuddered violently as it collided with a truck in the adjacent lane. Up ahead there was a crash as a sedan smashed through the barrier of an overpass, its tires spinning as it launched itself into the air, chunks of rubble trailing in its wake. It seemed suspended there as if moving in slow motion. For a brief instant a dead silence choked the air and Lucas stared wide eyed, and like many others looking on, in shock. Then a second crash as the car landed amidst the sea of amassed vehicles below, crushing its hood before going end-over-end and coming to rest on its roof.

Pandemonium followed as drivers and passengers closest to the incident vacated their vehicles struggling to get to a safe distance, fearful that a single spark could ignite a petroleum fuelled fireball. Others sat motionless in their seats too petrified to move a

muscle, whilst others still rushed towards the smoking wreckage searching for signs of life and looking for ways to help. Honking horns were heard all around. Unsurprisingly the bright blue light of smartphones could be seen at the end of extended arms as onlookers attempted to catch the fallout on camera. Lucas couldn't help acknowledging a fleeting feeling of sickness towards their callousness. His mind raced amidst all the commotion and he strained to make sense of what had just transpired. He figured that the lightning must have struck, or struck near enough to the car on the overpass to cause the driver to lose control.

Drew cursed again, slamming the palms of his hands down on the steering wheel. His breathing was heavy and agitated. He turned to Diane.

"Stay with the kid."

Diane's mouth cracked open as she began to protest. "Drew I – "

"Do NOT leave this car!" he barked as he pulled at the door handle and flung himself outside all in one motion. The door slammed behind him sending a jolt through the car.

The disorder outside was beginning to settle just as the unmistakable blue and red flashes appeared in the rear view mirror. Sirens followed as emergency service vehicles appeared on the scene. Police, paramedics, firefighters, first responders all arrived one by one until there was a small army on the scene.

Diane sat motionless, idly staring out the window as though completely oblivious to all the happenings of the night. Lucas doubted whether she noticed him exit the vehicle. The rain had eased though flashes of lightning could still be seen in the distance illuminating the dark curves of the swollen masses above, and with each Lucas waited for the inevitable rumble that rolled in over the hustle and bustle of the thoroughfare. Traffic had come to a complete standstill. All around him Lucas watched as dozens of umbrellas were produced out of back seats and boots. As he surveyed the turmoil he became aware of the extent of the devastation – multiple collisions, one head on as a driver had diverged into oncoming traffic. Paramedics were standing by with a stretcher as firefighters forced their way into the front seat to retrieve a passenger. From what Lucas could see of the state of the vehicles it did not bode well for anyone involved.

Lucas' short, raven black hair was quickly matted by the wind whipped rain that continued to fall in crazy chaotic drops. They riddled the surface of the surrounding cars like a persistent drumming of nails. The humidity made Lucas' cropped angular fringe

stick to his forehead, its lowermost point resting well above his left brow. Though thick, his hair was not heavy or coarse, and when not being drenched by an endless downpour retained a naturally tousled appearance throughout. Lucas reflexively furrowed his brow in an effort to keep the beads that ran from his hairline out of his eyes. They instead framed the angular face he had inherited from his mother – streaming down and skirting his hooded, deep set eyes and towards the corners of his full, straight lips. He felt each as they fell away from, and beneath his jaw, until the rain was running down his face in a thin layer.

A piece of rubble came loose from the overpass barrier, glancing off the rim of a car roof and smashing on the asphalt below. The unexpected commotion as bystanders were ordered to get clear drew Lucas' attention back to the steaming wreck beneath the bridge. Police officers had begun to form a perimeter to hold back the spectators who had gradually worked their way inwards towards the scene of the accident. A news crew pulled up in their van on a side street in front and to the left on Lucas. He watched as the doors swung open and they hurried to retrieve their equipment dressed in hooded blue plastic raincoats. They weaved their way through the congestion of cars to join the small crowd that had formed on the policed boundary. Red and blue lights flashed as an ambulance eased its way down the opposite lane where traffic still barely flowed, stopping as close to the overturned vehicle as possible. Police officers could be seen managing the situation on the overpass above.

Lucas was doing his best to process everything that was going on around him, and then, as if someone had flicked a switch in his brain, all the clamour and racket of the highway perforated his ears – violently. He instinctively pushed the palms of his hands into his ears. Pain shot through his head with a terrible intensity and he groaned in agony. Sirens blared and the voices of a hundred people melted together in his mind. A shrill cacophony of deafening sounds reverberated inside his skull, continuing to rise in pitch until all Lucas could hear was a piercing screech. He felt dazed, and as though his head was going to explode. As he spun around in panic he almost lost his footing and automatically placed a hand on the car roof to prevent him from collapsing. Then, just as he thought he couldn't bear it any longer, the noises faded. He could feel his body trembling, his legs as though they might give out at any second. Nausea washed over him and for a moment he feared he might be sick. When the world had stopped spinning he regained his composure. His head still throbbed, but the pain was dull at least. He looked around, conscious of anyone who had seen his little episode, but everyone was distracted by their own situation.

"What the hell was that all about?"

Lucas peered through the back seat window to the front where his mother sat – she was none the wiser. “Good”, he thought. The last thing she needed was something else to worry about, and Lucas never cared to be at the centre of such worries. The day had certainly taken its toll on her. It’s not every day that you’re forced to lie on the stand – to say that your partner hadn’t started the fight which ended in an assault charge. Lucas couldn’t stomach the fact that Drew was probably going to get away with putting a man in hospital, a man that was easily his better (though that wasn’t a difficult feat). He waited outside the courtroom against Drew’s wishes. By the time they’d gotten to the car Drew was already going on about how unconvincing Diane was in her testimony. He snowballed from there, but Lucas knew better than to pick a fight despite every fibre of his being smouldering with fury. Drew hadn’t hesitated to call the authorities on Lucas before, and Lucas didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of dropping the charges at the imploration of his mother like some merciful God.

As Lucas expected, about fifty feet away from the far side of the car Drew was arguing with the truck driver he had hit, making exasperated gestures and pointing at the elongated scrape and dent in the side of his car. The truck driver was a full head taller than Drew and Lucas hoped that he would take a swing at him. They were both so caught up that they took no notice of the two officers approaching in yellow raincoats. The officers promptly intervened, separating them before their quarrel could escalate. Lucas gaze lingered a second longer as they began their line of questioning. He detested the kind of mood Drew would be in by the time they got back to the apartment, but as was the norm in recent months his loathing for Drew was outweighed by his anger.

His wrath gradually ebbed away as more pressing thoughts entered his mind –

*“Who was the person under the streetlamp?
What was the deal with the sword?
Did they have something to do with the accident?
How is that even possible?”*

All Lucas knew was the way he felt when he saw the figure. A palpable unease had enveloped him. For a moment before the lamp burst he could have sworn that they were looking right at him from under the hood. It all seemed too coincidental.

“Maybe I’m just being paranoid”, he thought to himself.

He resolved that it was just the rain messing with his vision. That explained why he didn't see them approach the streetlamp; and the lamp bursting could have been the result of an electrical surge caused by the storm. He was satisfied with his explanation. Why then did he still feel fingers closing around his stomach? Something was definitely off.