

XOR

THE SHAPE OF DARKNESS

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The man, who wasn't quite a man, often intruded upon Sarah Nash's thoughts at the most inopportune moment.

It was a beautiful night, a warm eastern breeze softly frolicking about, the trees smiling as they swayed softly to and fro, the forest filled with the happy chitter-chatter of birds, squirrels, and other little critters. Even the myriad stars in the cloudless sky were shining just a tad bit brighter.

That's how it seemed to Sarah as she drove home that night. She'd had a good day at work and the gorgeous night peeping through the car windows just made things that much better. Stars, she thought, are exactly what we should be gazing at when I get home. Sarah was thinking of the telescope her son Lewis had received for his eighth birthday a couple of weeks ago. The boy had been very excited about it, and they'd pointed the apparatus to the sky right after the party was over. But tonight was the first night since the birthday that the heavens were so clear.

We're going to have a great time, thought Sarah happily. Oh, how she loved her son. As she drove along the dark road her mind drifted to that night eight years ago, the night Lewis had entered her life. She always felt it was she

who'd been born that glorious night. The joy she'd felt then was beyond words.

And just now she felt that same kind of joy all over again. It was as if someone had decided to make this night a perfect one: a good day at work, followed by Nature in all its glory, culminating with star-gazing alongside her son in just a short while. Her hands were tingling with anticipation: She couldn't wait to ruffle Lewis's hair and have him admonish her, "Mom, stop." She knew he loved it despite his protestations.

Sarah kept driving on, taking care not to step on the gas pedal too hard. Although the road was as dry as could be it was still quite dark despite the shining stars. And, as impatient as she was to get home, she felt like taking things slowly, allowing herself to soak up the forest's tranquility. Besides, she wanted to prolong the heartwarming feeling of anticipation.

Sarah started quietly humming a tune she'd heard on the radio that morning, during breakfast. She couldn't name the song and had no idea who the performer was — but the tune had somehow stuck in her head. I'll ask Lewis about the

song when I get home, *she thought*. He always knows such things. Such a smart, beautiful, wonderful boy.

And then the man who'd appeared on that fateful night sauntered into Sarah's mind uninvited, as though wishing to spoil the perfection of the night. What was it about him? reflected Sarah, as she'd done thousands of times in the past. Had she really seen what she'd thought she'd seen when his hood had fallen off? Was he really not quite ... human?

She shook her head. No, not tonight. She wasn't going to spoil her joy by dwelling on that question. She was going to focus on —

WHAT'S THAT? screamed a voice in Sarah's mind as she turned a bend and found herself facing a huge white polar bear in the middle of the road. Even as her reflexes kicked in and she hit the brakes with all her might some tiny part of her mind was dumbfounded at the incongruity. A polar bear? HERE?

The car swerved violently to the right and Sarah, panicking, twisted the steering wheel hard to the left.

But to no avail.

The car was out of control, refusing to obey Sarah's will to stop. The wretched machine seemed to have taken on a will of its own, flying off the road and straight into the thick trunk of a tree. The deafening noise of a crash interrupted the forest's serenity only for a split second — and then all was calm again.

The front side of the car was a tangle of twisted metal and billowing smoke, with its driver lying unconscious inside the wreck. Her head lay on the now-crumpled airbag, which — along with the seatbelt she always took care to buckle — had done its job. Sarah was still alive.

But just barely.

After a few minutes she regained consciousness. Strangely enough, she felt little pain. Perhaps even more strangely, her first thought as she woke up was not about the accident, or Abe, or Lewis — but about that man, eight years ago. The image in her mind was clearer than ever.

I know now. I know.

The clarity lasted for a brief moment and then a fog entered her mind. As it settled in for good, Sarah found it

more and more difficult to stay awake. She knew she must, she tried hard to, but darkness was seeping through.

Sarah Nash knew she was dying. And as her body failed with each passing moment, her mind was struggling to hold on to some shred of thought.

Finally, all that remained was sorrow — a deep sadness at leaving her beloved family.

I'm sorry, Abe.

I'm sorry, Lewis.

A thick, heavy curtain was quickly descending upon her mind.

I'm sorry.

I'm —

And then the final blackness prevailed.

Bedbugs

I'm twelve years old!

This was the first thought that entered Lewis Nash's mind as he woke up that morning. Then came a second thought, right after he'd rubbed his eyes.

What the heck is that?

Lewis was staring at his left foot, which had popped out from underneath the blanket. Only it wasn't *his* left foot, the one he'd gone to bed with last night — indeed, every night before that. It was the left foot of some giant ... Some giant ... Insect!

Lewis jumped up on his bed, throwing the blanket so forcefully it landed on top of the wardrobe. He looked down at his legs, brought his hands up to examine them closely, cautiously peeked at his feet, and ... started laughing.

"I'm so silly," he said to himself.

His entire body — not just his left foot — was that of a giant insect, which could only mean one thing, of course: He was dreaming.

No need to panic. Without bothering to figure out whether he was a grasshopper, a dragonfly, a ladybug, a termite, or maybe just a plain brown cockroach, he got back into bed, shut his eyes tight, and whispered to himself,

“This is a dream. I’m going to wake up now, open my eyes, and find out I’m not a bug. I’m a boy named Lewis Nash and today is my twelfth birthday.”

Slowly and anxiously he opened his eyes again and rubbed them hard to make sure he was wide awake this time. Holding his breath he brought his right hand up to his face — and then let out a sigh of relief: The bug episode had, indeed, been a dream.

Whew.

He was now back to being the same old Lewis Nash he’d been when he’d gone to bed the night before. The boy checked his hands again, just to make sure they weren’t insect limbs.

They weren’t.

Lewis let out one final sigh. That strange I’m-an-insect dream made him realize how little he appreciated his own body. He got up excitedly — *it’s my birthday!* — and trotted

over to the bathroom to brush his teeth. He could hear the television from the kitchen downstairs, where, as usual, his dad was already waiting for him at the breakfast table.

While brushing, Lewis's thoughts turned to the film they'd seen yesterday in biology class. It was about life on Earth around one hundred million years ago when the dinosaurs had ruled the planet. An image of one of the smaller beasts formed in his mind — what was it called, a velociraptor maybe? — and Lewis suddenly found himself brushing razor-sharp teeth. He stared wildly into the mirror and what stared back at him was a frightening dinosaur.

A dinosaur! First he'd changed into an insect and now this. Was he dreaming again? It couldn't be. He'd rubbed his eyes really hard just now, and besides, he felt *wide* awake. But if this wasn't a dream ...

Lewis had many fine characteristics, one of which was courage. This had been remarked upon from a very early age. "Look how brave he is," his parents' friends would say when he was only two years old. "Lewis isn't afraid of anything," Abe Nash would add proudly, although a bit worriedly. Who knew where his son's acts of bravery would

one day lead the boy. After Abe had lost his beloved wife Sarah, the boy's mother, in a car crash four years ago he became even more fearful of Lewis's courage. *I just hope he does nothing foolish*, he'd think from time to time, knowing that losing his son would surely be too much for him.

And so, upon seeing the dinosaur in the mirror the brave boy didn't panic as an ordinary boy might have. Instead he shut his eyes thinking, *Okay, so I'm not dreaming. I closed my eyes and concentrated before and it worked. I'll do it again. Here goes ... "I'm a boy. I'm a boy. My name is Lewis Nash."*

He opened his eyes to find himself looking at a boy with light-brown hair, an arrow-straight nose, full red lips (upon which his grandfather had been remarking lately, with a wink, "That boy will grow up to be one fine kisser"), and — the most striking feature of all — one blue eye and one green eye. In short, he was Lewis Nash again.

"Are you coming down to breakfast?" came Abe's voice from downstairs.

"In a minute, Dad," shouted Lewis, washing away the last of the toothpaste. He needed time to think, even though

he'd shortly have to rush down, eat his breakfast, and head on to school. He returned to his room and seated himself on his favorite swivel chair, right in front of his cluttered desk.

Lewis knew he was an adopted child, his parents having told him some four years ago, a few days after his eighth birthday — and exactly one week before Sarah's death in the car crash. Learning he was adopted hadn't been much of a shock because he'd somehow known this deep inside all along. In fact, in that deep place inside, he knew much more. Ever since he could remember himself Lewis had had a very strong feeling of not quite belonging, of being *very* different from the rest of the kids. While he may have lived his whole life in this lush suburb of Atlanta, he was not really from around here. He couldn't explain this feeling, and he'd never discussed it with his dad. He loved his father deeply, but somehow the boy knew he had to keep these thoughts to himself. *Maybe* if his mom were alive ... But then, if Sarah were alive *many* things would be different. Lewis missed her terribly. Every single day.

OK, he thought, apparently I can change my shape, become some animal, and then change back again — all

simply by imagining. I've always known I wasn't like everybody else. I guess I'm like that mutant from the X-Men who can change into another man or woman. Is that it? Am I a mutant? Are there more kids like me in the world? Can they also change shape? Can they do other stuff? Will I be able to find them?

Had not his dad called again from downstairs, Lewis's list of questions would have grown to no end. The boy had always been extremely curious, often tiring out his teachers with endless questions.

I'll have to figure this out later, he thought as he rolled downstairs on the wooden banister.

"What's up with you?" asked Michael Gibbs, Lewis's best friend, as he seated himself beside Lewis on the school bus. Michael was very skinny and also the tallest boy in their class, which at times could get annoying since he liked to show off. Like grabbing a book from a high shelf Lewis could only reach by mounting a chair, or simply staring *down* at Lewis. Sometimes, when Lewis got fed up with Michael's flaunting his tallness he'd ask him, very innocently, if he

played basketball. This would always get to Michael who hated that question since everyone asked him that but, alas, he was not very good at sports. The basketball question would cause Michael's deep dark face to flush red in anger — but then Lewis would burst into laughter which usually (though not always ...) managed to calm things down.

“What do you mean?” replied Lewis, although he knew exactly what his friend meant: Lewis had chosen the very last row, something he wasn't in the habit of doing.

“You never sit way back here,” explained Michael. Of course, Lewis could not reveal the true reason for his choice of seat: he was afraid of changing into something. *What would happen if I suddenly became an elephant?* he thought, and then quickly repeated in his mind, *I'm not an elephant, I'm a boy. I'm a boy. I'm Lewis.* Good, he was still a boy.

“Why are you mumbling?” asked Michael. Apparently, Lewis hadn't quite succeeded in keeping things in his mind.

“Nothing, nothing,” he told his friend. “I’m okay. Maybe it’s because I’m twelve years old today. You know, people get weird at this age.”

“Oh, right, it’s your birthday,” said Michael teasingly.

“As if you forgot,” said Lewis, and punched his friend in the stomach. The boy had been talking of nothing else this past week. Dad had promised him a “very special present” and no enticing on Lewis’s part could get him to reveal what it was. He and Michael had been making guesses for days now, and Lewis was ready to burst with curiosity.

Michael punched him back, saying, “You’re such a cockroach.” Normally, Lewis would pick a fight over this with his friend. But today all he could think of was, *I’m a boy, I’m not a cockroach, I’m a boy. I’m Lewis Nash.*

Whew, that was close — he’d already started feeling his left foot turning into that of an insect’s inside his shoe.

Close. Very close.

On the way back from school Lewis once again chose the bus’s back row and immediately became engrossed in contemplation. He’d been doing a lot of thinking during

classes today, which was quite out of character. Lewis usually paid close attention in class and asked a whole lot of questions. A couple of teachers today had even asked him if he was sick, and he just nodded and said absent-mindedly, “I’m fine, I’m fine.”

Lewis had been thinking of how different he was, how unlike anybody else sitting in that classroom — in the whole school for that matter. The realization made him sad at first but then he came to appreciate how useful his newfound skill could be.

He thought of Abigail Peterson, who sat two rows ahead of him in class. Lewis had had a crush on her since last summer, but the thought of approaching her mortified him. He tried to catch her a few times, when she was alone, but the closer he got to those red curls and light-green eyes, the more his feet refused to move. At about ten yards his feet would completely freeze, and so, alas, he’d never been able to talk to Abigail. Today, during history class, a brilliant idea came to his mind: if he could change into insects and dinosaurs, maybe he could change into people, too. So he’d change himself into Chloe Simpson, Abigail Peterson’s best

friend, then walk up to Abigail — as Chloe! — and tell her what a great guy that Lewis Nash was, and how she should talk to him.

Abigail usually listens to Chloe, he thought. I-as-Chloe prepare the stage, and then I-as-me just happens to come along. Brilliant. Sweet. I'm a genius.

Lewis came up with several other brilliant ideas. Like changing into a grown-up so he could get into any movie he wanted to, whatever its rating — he could even bring Michael along to the PG-13 movies! Or changing into a cat so he could climb trees — he loved climbing trees — and if a dog started chasing him, he'd change into a lion. And how about changing into a bird ... No, an eagle! He'd be able to fly. Things couldn't get much better than that!

Or maybe they could ... How about changing into Principal Fields and telling Mr. Gurney, his gym teacher, that Lewis Nash had a special science project and would have to be absent from gym classes until the end of the year. *That would finally get Mr. Gurney off my back*, he thought happily. For some reason the obnoxious gym teacher was always picking on him: "You're not running fast enough, Lewis,"

“You can jump higher, Lewis,” “Oh, come on, Lewis, you can do better than that.”

Just thinking how Mr. Gurney pronounced his name, emphasizing both syllables, Le-Wis, made him shudder.

Yup, he thought, Mr. Gurney will soon get a visit from the “Principal.”

Through all this brainstorming Lewis kept repeating to himself, *I’m a boy, I’m Lewis*, so that his ideas wouldn’t suddenly become reality in the middle of the classroom. He’d have to learn as soon as possible how to control this ability to change shape.

So there he was, sitting in the bus, thinking up new ideas for shapes, when he noticed the noise the other kids were making, way beyond the usual racket. He heard things like “Fire,” “Explosion,” and “Police.” Lewis looked outside the window.

The bus had stopped. Not far up ahead a house was on fire, surrounded by several firemen trying to put it out. The front of the house was full of vehicles: fire engines, police cruisers, and a couple of ambulances. It took Lewis

several seconds to realize something terrible: The burning house was his own!

One moment he was on the bus, the next he was frantically running towards his home. *It can't be*, he thought. *This must be some kind of mistake*. But before he could reach his home — about three houses away — a man appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, and grabbed Lewis powerfully by the scruff of his neck.

“Not so fast, my young Lord,” said the man, smiling. He was huge, over six-and-a-half feet tall, with a very hairy face, and teeth that were far too sharp, his whole appearance reminding Lewis somewhat of a wolf. He wore a black stocking cap over his head. Lewis tried to wriggle out of the man’s grasp but couldn’t budge. It was like being held by a steel vise. Bravely, he tried a different approach.

“I’m no Lord, I’m Lewis Nash, and that’s my home burning,” he said in as reasonable and calm a voice as he could muster.

“Not a Lord, huh? So you know *nothing*,” mumbled the man in a deep voice. “Interesting.”

Just then a huge explosion was heard from the house and the man glanced behind him, instinctively wanting to assure his own safety. Consequently, he slightly released his tight grip of the boy for a split second. That was enough for Lewis, who took immediate advantage of the opportunity, freed himself, and ran away as fast as he could. The wolf-man turned his head, growled, and gave chase.

Lewis had always been a fast runner but he was no match against someone twice his size who was also in superb physical shape. The wolf-man was gaining fast. As he rounded a corner Lewis noticed a swift movement from behind a bush and he suddenly found himself standing beside a tall, hooded man. As if that were not surprising enough, the wolf-man had stopped running and was now looking around, cursing.

“Long, you devil,” he growled, waving his fist in the air.

I'm right here, thought Lewis. How come he can't see me?

“I’ve placed an invisibility shield around the two of us,” whispered the hooded man in his ear, as though in reply to Lewis’s thought.

If we’re both invisible how come I can see you? thought Lewis. But this question would have to go unanswered as there were more pressing matters at hand.

“Let’s get out of here quickly, my Lord,” said the hooded man. “He *can* hear us, and, even more dangerous, he has a highly acute sense of smell.”

Even though Lewis knew nothing of this hooded man, he *had* just saved him, and besides — anything, or anyone, that got him away from the wolf-man couldn’t be all bad. The boy and the man tiptoed away at first; then, when they had put some distance between themselves and the wolf-man, they began to run.

“Is there a river nearby? A stream? Maybe a lake?” asked the hooded man.

“There’s a small lake in the park, over there,” said Lewis, pointing left. “Why?”

In reply, Lewis’s protector pointed behind them, where the wolf-man was still in pursuit. “Though he’s slower when

relying only on smell, he's still quite fast. But he can't smell over water. That's our only chance."

The two turned left towards the park and in no time were crossing the bridge at the lake's narrow tip. Behind them the wolf-man had stopped and was again cursing and waving his fist in the air. The hooded man led Lewis outside the park, and after walking for several minutes he stopped near a secluded street corner where a large cat was sunbathing on a bench.

"I think we're safe now," he said, and twisted a ring on his left pinky. The cat jumped up in fear and quickly skedaddled away.

"I've just turned off the invisibility shield," smiled the man and sat on the bench, motioning Lewis to take a seat beside him.

At some point during their escape his hood had fallen off, and all Lewis could do now was stare in wonder. "You're ... Those are ..."

"Beautiful, are they not, my Lord?" smiled the man warmly, touching his long, fluffy ears. He replaced the hood over his head.

Lewis finally managed to utter, “Those are rabbit ears!”

The man’s smile disappeared and he became very serious. “Listen carefully, my Lord, we have very little time. The Drake will eventually catch up with us.”

“The Drake?” repeated Lewis.

“Drakes are humans enhanced with wolf genes. They’re named after Dr. Drake, the scientist who created them. This particular Drake works for the Realm Pirates.”

“Wolf genes? Realm Pirates?” Lewis was totally confused.

“We have to focus, my Lord,” said the man. “Like I said, we’ve little time.”

Over the past half-hour all Lewis could think about was escaping the wolf-man, the ... Drake. But now, sitting on the bench and catching his breath, he suddenly remembered.

“My dad!” he cried out. “We must go back!!” He tried to get up but the man caught his arm.

“Your ...” he said gently, “Your father is ... gone, my Lord.”

“Gone?” said Lewis, not quite grasping the meaning. *Gone?* Then it hit him. “You mean he’s *dead?* No way!” The boy had never gotten over losing his mom four years ago — and now his dad, too. He was an *orphan* now. He remembered an old movie he’d seen on television, *Oliver Twist*, about this orphaned boy in nineteenth-century England. Lewis’s mind filled with images from the film: the wretched orphanage, the beatings Oliver would suffer, how he always went hungry. Was he going to end up like that? No way! His dad wasn’t dead!

Once again he tried to get up, only to be held tightly by the rabbit-man.

“Who are you?” asked Lewis impatiently. “And why do you keep calling me ‘my Lord’?”

“I am Master Long Ears,” replied the man. “But everyone calls me Master Long. Now, please, my Lord, sit quietly for a few minutes while I explain some important things to you.”

Lewis decided he wanted to hear what the master had to say.

“Today is your twelfth birthday and you began to ... change shape. Correct, my Lord?” Lewis nodded in agreement. “That is because you are a Shaper, born to a Shaper family, on a planet called Xor.”

“Zor?” said Lewis in a hushed voice.

“Xor,” repeated the man imperturbably, pronouncing it ksor. “You are the only child of High Lord and High Lady Shaper. You are Lord Shaper.” With that, Master Long bowed his head. “And I am your servant. My family has served the High Lord Shapers for many generations.”

I'm a Lord? I'm a Shaper? thought Lewis. *I'm Lord Shaper?*

This was all too much. Since this morning he'd found out he could change shape, seen his house burn, learned that his dad was dead, been chased by a Drake, and was now sitting here with a rabbit-man who was telling him he was Lord Shaper from some place called Xor.

The boy rose swiftly to avoid being caught by Master Long. “I'm going home,” he said simply.

“That would be highly inadvisable, my Lord,” said Master Long gently, though he didn't attempt to grab hold of

Lewis this time. “The Realm Pirates will have their people waiting for you.”

Still standing, Lewis asked, “You mentioned them before. Who are they?”

“The Realm is short for Cyber Realm,” explained Master Long. “Think of the Internet you have here on Backwater —”

“Backwater?” interrupted Lewis.

“That’s how we on Xor refer to this world,” said Long evenly. “Anyway, the Cyber Realm is like the Internet — only far more advanced.”

“What do you mean by ‘advanced’? And who are the Pirates? And why is that Drake chasing me? And if I’m from Xor how did I end up here? Was it you who brought me here as a baby? Did you give me to my parents?” Thinking of Sarah and Abe, his adoptive parents, Lewis now felt anger rather than sadness. He started hitting Master Long.

“Did you dump me here? Did you?”

Gently, Long placed his arms around Lewis, hugging him silently, until the boy’s anger was replaced by tears. “Yes, my Lord,” said the master quietly, “I was the one who

placed you with Sarah and Abe Nash almost twelve years ago.”

“Why?” Lewis managed to utter through his tears.

“To keep you safe, my Lord,” replied Master Long. “High Lady Shaper herself — your mother — commanded me to bring you here.”

My mother, Mom, died four years ago, thought Lewis as he wiped his tears.

“So what’s happening now? Why was my dad killed? What do these Realm Pirates want from me? Why have you come?” Of the many questions, the man with the rabbit ears decided to answer only that last one.

“I have come,” said Master Long solemnly, “because you are the only person who can save Xor from total and utter ruination.”

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