

Whistlestop

Kindle Edition

Chapter 2

As soon as Jerry pulled his car into the parking at the ballpark, he knew it was a mistake. He remembered what happened two years ago very clearly. Brad was an ogre as a coach, pushing heavy discipline on the six-year-old boys, and there was no reason to believe anything would have changed. He could also see the change in his son as they walked toward the field. Jeremy had been lively and joking around at breakfast less than an hour ago, and now he was somber and reserved, hardly speaking or making eye contact. The two climbed into the stands where the parents of both teams were chatting and rooting for their children.

The teams could not have been more different. Brad's team was tightly regimented and went through their practice without humor or the mistakes so common to eight-year-old athletes. Other than their physical size, it looked like a semi-pro team about to take on a bunch of grade-schoolers. Jerry waved when Brad caught his gaze, but Brad only smiled slightly and went back to his work. Jerry left Jeremy in the stands and went to the concession stand to get a couple of sodas and some nachos. When he returned, Jeremy was sitting with his head down, looking at his feet. He seemed frozen in place. "What's wrong, Son?"

"They keep staring at me, Dad. It's freaking me out. Can we go now?"

"You're exaggerating, Jeremy. No one is staring . . ." his voice trailed off as he looked at the field. Each of the boys on Brad's team was staring at them with abject hatred and disgust in their eyes. He glanced over at Brad who was laughing.

"Do you remember now?" whispered the same voice from his dream. Jerry looked around, but there was no one else nearby.

"Let's get out of here, Jeremy," he said, pulling his son up and heading down the stands.

"Thank you, Daddy. Those boys are not nice."

"We don't really know them and shouldn't judge others," he replied as he pulled Jeremy toward their car. He unlocked the door and his son climbed inside. After closing the door, he turned and found Brad Lincoln standing inches away.

"I thought Jeremy was going to join the team, Jerry?" he smiled, though his eyes did not.

"Sorry, boss, but he's not feeling well, and frankly, neither am I. I think we both got food poisoning or something at breakfast."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Brad replied. He put his hand on the car door and quickly pulled it back. "What's going on with your car? It feels like ice." He put his hand to his mouth and blew on it to warm his fingers.

"What's that smell?" Jeremy said from inside.

"Yeah, what is that? It almost smells like cordite or gunpowder," Jerry added.

Brad chuckled and replied, "It's probably me. I took the boys to the gun range this morning. It's important that a boy knows how to protect himself, right, Jeremy? You never know what kind of kook you're going to run into."

"Yes, sir," Jeremy replied.

"I'll see you on Monday, boss."

"Okay, I'm sorry it didn't work out with the team. I'd like to invite your family out for dinner this week. What do you think?"

“Sounds like fun, Brad. Let me check with Lynn.”

“Of course, I think if Jeremy got to know the boys on the team, he’d change his tune. I know we can get a little carried away at game time. No hard feelings, okay Jeremy?”

“No sir.”

“Good luck with your game, Brad.”

Brad smiled broadly and replied, “Luck is for suckers, Jerry.” He turned and walked away.

Jerry hurried and got in the car, started the motor, and drove out of the lot, heading home. After a few blocks, the voice spoke in his right ear, “Please don’t go to his house, Jeremy. He is not as he seems.” Jerry ignored it. A few blocks later, the voice said, “Now do you remember me, Jeremy?” Still he acted as though he could not hear. The car was on their street when the voice implored, “Please say you remember! Please say my name!” Jerry ignored it still.

After a moment, Jeremy asked, “Why aren’t you answering him, Dad?”

Jerry slammed on the brakes and pulled over to the curb. “You heard that voice?”

“Of course, Daddy, I heard him talking to you last night in the kitchen too.”

“Is that the Jeremy you were talking about?”

“Yes. Do you know him too?”

Jerry clinched his eyes and tried to remember. “I don’t know.”

“All is truly lost then,” the voice said.

“Do you know his name, Son?”

“Of course I do, Daddy.”

“Please say my name, baby Jeremy.”

“I’m not a baby!”

“I apologize most humbly,” the voice said. “What is my name, Master Jeremy?”

“Jeremy Bumblebee Mistcatcher Whistlebop!” The voice laughed and soon Jerry was laughing along.

“I don’t think this is funny!” Jeremy complained.

“We apologize with our whole hearts, Master Jeremy,” the voice said. “Your attempt was most honorable; although I’m afraid you made a few mistakes. Would you care to say it, Old Master Jeremy?”

“This isn’t possible,” Jerry said. “This was all childhood games I used to play when I was lonely. We’re dreaming all of this.”

“That is likely true, but this dream yearns only for his dearest friend to speak his name, and then I shall leave you two to decide how you will deal with this. Do you remember?”

Tears streamed down Jerry’s cheeks as his old memories flooded back into his mind. He remembered the day his grandfather was murdered. Almost immediately thereafter, his father took his family and moved to San Diego, where they lived now. For several years, Jerry had no friends, and his family tried to lie low, although Jerry never understood why. His imaginary friend was all he had. He spent his life knowing his memories were lies he told himself to avoid his fear of being alone. One day, his father told him the danger had passed, and he was allowed to return to school and meet new friends. As time went by, he lost the need for his secret friend, and grew up. But now, something had changed and all those memories were as fresh as the day his grandfather died right in front of him. “Your name is Jeremiah Beetleweed Mosscatcher of Marblehead, Whistlestop.”

The voice was laughing and humming a little tune. Jeremy started humming along, but Jerry was not pleased with the situation. After a moment, Jeremiah said, “What is wrong, Master

Jerry? Are you not pleased that I have returned?” Rather than respond, Jerry climbed out of the car and sat on the curb, holding his head in his hands.

Jeremy sat next to his father and put a hand on his knee. “What’s wrong, Daddy? Why aren’t you happy that Jeremiah is back? You said he used to be your friend.”

Jerry sighed heavily and replied, “I know it’s hard for you to understand, but having an imaginary friend is okay for children, but as an adult, I should be over that phase of my life. Does that make any sense?”

“Dad, Jeremiah is not imaginary; he is as real as you and me.” Jerry looked up and stared at his son. “You remember the mess in my room yesterday? I didn’t do it, it was Jeremiah. Imaginary people don’t move stuff around.”

“Fred did say that he heard a lot of noises coming from the house yesterday after you guys left for the bus stop. You really think that he did it?”

“Jeremiah likes to get attention, and sometimes he likes getting me in trouble.”

“Maybe I should just ask him.”

“Sorry, Dad, but when you got out of the car, he told me he would not be around for a few days. He said you needed to decide what you want to do.”

“What I want to do?”

“He said the memories would come back to you. He wants you to remember the tales of Winterpast that he told you, and especially he wants you to remember about your granddad.”

The image of his grandfather lying on the floor of their home in a pool of his own blood burned into his mind. The events of that evening were still a blur of flashing lights, terrible screams and the wicked blade that sliced through Mort Winslow, almost cleaving him in two. Jerry could not recall the attacker’s face, but there seemed to be several of them, cackling in joy at the death of the old man. In an instant they were gone, leaving only Jerry and his father to deal with their grief. Tears streamed down Jerry’s cheeks at that horrible sight, now replayed more than twenty years later. “I wish you could have known Grandpa Mort, Jeremy. He was a special man.”

“Jeremiah called him by another name, Dad.”

“What was that?”

“He called him Mordecai Davis Iron-heart of Winslow.”

Jerry remembered that name now as well. Where were those magical memories for all of these years, he wondered. Why were they coming back now, and why through his son? “Jeremy, let’s keep this story between us for now, okay? I don’t think your mom and sister are ready for this yet.”

“I know. They’ll think we’re crazy!”

Jerry chuckled and stood up, but did not reply. The thought of them both being insane was too likely true to be joked about.

Jerry Winslow could not sleep yet again. Lynn and the children had gone to bed upstairs hours ago. Jerry sat on the couch, nursing his second glass of whisky over ice. The odd encounter with Brad’s softball team, followed by a reunion with his old imaginary childhood friend was more than his mind could handle. He spent the afternoon trying to remember the time he spent with Jeremiah, but all he could muster were bits and pieces, instantaneous flashes of memory and nothing that made sense. Then he had decided to put those childhood memories behind him and focus on reality. His grandfather’s murder had stained his entire life. His father’s desire to avoid as much of the world as possible forced young Jerry to make up his own reality, and the place

called Winterpast. He was almost certain he had made it up, but could those tales have been told to him by Jeremiah? It had been so long ago, and why was his imagination bringing him back now? “No!” he exclaimed. “I’m not going to be a child anymore. Those were just make-believe.” He drained his glass and set it on the table, grabbed the remote control and turned on the television. The final part of one of his favorite movies was on, so he slouched down into his seat and began to watch. His eyelids became heavy and he was fighting to stay awake. Soon, he did not know whether he was still watching or dreaming he was watching it.

After the closing credits, an announcer said, “Stay tuned for our next feature, Tales of Winterpast.” After the title screen, the scene changed to an aerial view of a very long and broad valley filled with a dense forest, bordered by tall snowcapped mountains on one side and rolling hills on the other. In the middle of the forest was a large medieval city built from lumber and stone. On the outskirts of the city, most of the buildings were built in the tree branches, harkening back to earlier times. At the city center was a large castle. Hundreds of colorful flags flapped in the breeze above the many spires inside the protective walls. The narrator spoke, “The city and valley of Thrace are the dominion of the trehbor, absolute ruler of the planet Winterpast, one of the few remaining places not absorbed into the Empire of Axis. It is said that only the power of the Temple of Light has protected the freedom of its citizenry. Winterpast had a remarkable history back in the time of the Knights of Winterpast, who kept the universe safe by stopping the demon hordes and their seed. Now, the few remaining knights are only able to protect this one spot of hope in a million realities of death and despair.”

The camera angle shot upward and over the mountains and began to cross an impossibly bleak and inhospitable desert. The image settled on the remnants of a small village by a dry riverbed. The ruins were charred by fire, and dozens of skeletons, bleached white by years of relentless sunlight stood witness to a past tragedy. The narration continued, “Here in the remains of the village named Winslow, the last of the great Knights of Winterpast either died or exiled themselves to other realities, hoping to rebuild and return. Most were hunted down and slaughtered, although no one can know if any still survive. The last recorded event was when Moab Iron-heart sacrificed himself so that his brother Mordechai and his son could escape. The Empire claims that they were found in the Empty Realm and killed. If that is true, there is no hope of humanity now.”

Jerry woke to a loud voice on the television selling cookware. He pressed the off button on the remote and set it on the table. He was lying on the couch, so he swung his legs off and onto the floor where his feet felt someone. His son was sleeping on the floor. He picked the boy up and headed upstairs. Jerry put Jeremy into his bed and tucked him in, and then went to his own bed and climbed under the covers. Soon, he was out like a light.

The smell of frying bacon coaxed Jerry out of bed. He hurried downstairs to find Lynn standing at the cooktop and the children sitting at the table, sharing the Sunday comics. He kissed his wife on the cheek, pulled a mug from the cupboard and filled it with coffee, sweetener and half-and-half, and then sat at the table. “Did you sleep well, honey?”

“I did until you came to bed in the middle of the night.”

“I’m sorry about that. I fell asleep watching some movie.”

“What was it?”

He chuckled and said, “Frankly, I don’t remember.”

“It was Tales of Winterpast, Dad,” Jeremy said. The memory started to come back and Jerry’s mouth fell open and he stared blankly at his son.

“Yeah, he’s right, Dad,” Lilian answered. “I tried to watch too, but it was too boring. No action at all. It was like a travel show or something. After a couple of minutes, I just went to bed.”

Lynn came to the table and set a plate of bacon on the Lazy Susan and a plate with two eggs and hash browns in front of her husband. “I don’t like it when you two kids stay up past your bedtime.” She turned to Jerry, “Why didn’t you send them to bed?”

“Dad was sleeping already, Mom,” Jeremy replied and his sister nodded.

Lynn kissed Jerry on the cheek and said, “No more late nights for you either, Jerry,” causing the children to giggle.

Jerry pushed the memory out of his mind and chewed on a piece of bacon. He knew these had to be coincidences. There must be a place called Winterpast somewhere on Earth. The name sounded like it could be a Santa’s Village somewhere.

“Daddy,” Jeremy began, “was Grandpa really born on another planet?”

The room was instantly quiet, and Jerry could sense everyone looking at him, waiting for what he would say. After a minute of thinking, he replied, “I don’t think that’s possible, Jeremy. No one has ever even been to another planet.”

“But Dad, the movie said he was born on Winterpast.”

“Jeremy, I’m sorry, but that was just a movie. There must have been characters with similar names, that’s all.”

Lynn smiled and nodded at him. Lilian said, “You are such a dummy, Jeremy, thinking that Granddad is an alien or something.”

“Don’t call your brother names!” Lynn exclaimed.

“Sorry, Mommy,” Lilian said, but her eyes did not agree. She stuck her tongue out at her brother, who replied in kind.

“Breakfast is amazing, honey, but I need to make a quick call,” Jerry noted. “I’ll be right back.” He hurried out of the room, pulling out his cell phone, and heading out the front door. He sat on the front step and pressed a button.

“Hi, Son,” his father said. “What’s going on? Is everyone okay?”

“Lynn and the kids are great, Dad, but I’m not so sure about me.”

“What’s wrong, Son? Is it work?”

“No,” he said weakly, but then his mind rushed back to the encounter with Brad and his softball team. “No, it isn’t work, but is it okay if I ask you an odd question? I don’t want you to think I’m crazy though.”

“I would never think that, Jerry. You’re my boy and I love you. Please ask away?”

“Where were you born?”

His father laughed and then replied, “Winslow, Arizona, of course. But you knew that already, didn’t you? What’s this all about?”

“So, you definitely were not born in the village of Winslow on the planet Winterpast, right?”

“Shush! Never say that word on the phone! Jesus Christ, you have no idea how dangerous this is. Where did you get such an idea?”

“Dad, do you remember when we first moved to San Diego, after Granddad was killed?”

“How could I ever forget that day?”

“I don’t know if you remember, but when I couldn’t go out or to school, I invented an imaginary friend.”

“Oh my God, no, this can’t be happening again.”

“What do you mean, Dad? Do you remember Jer. . .?”

“Shush! For Christ’s sake, don’t say that name out loud or we’re all dead!” His father was breathing heavily. “Where are you, Son?”

“At home, sitting on the front stoop.”

“Is there anyone else around you can see?”

“No, just me, no wait, I can see Fred Tompkins looking out the window at me.”

“Oh, he’s okay. He’s just an old nosy bastard. Who have you told about this?”

“Nobody but you, Dad, but there is something you need to know. That imaginary friend has been talking to your grandson.”

“I can’t believe I was stupid enough to think this would ever be over, Son. Is it okay if Angie and I come over for dinner? I need to talk to you and my grandson in private.”

“I’ll check with Lynn, but I’m sure it’ll be okay. Just bring a bottle of wine.”

“I’ll bring two. I think we’ll need them. We’ll see you all later and please keep all of this to yourself, and ask your son to keep mum too, okay?”

“Yes, Dad.” The line went dead. He pushed the phone into his pocket. An odd feeling began to creep over him, as though hundreds of eyes were watching him. He looked around and could not see a soul. Then he noticed two cats across the street, crouched underneath a hedge. He could hear their low growls as they began to creep toward him. He stood and turned back to go inside. As he was opening the door, he turned to see one of the cats jumping through the air right at him. Its fangs and claws were exposed. When it was just a foot from his face, a flash of white came from his left, striking the cat and sending it tumbling to the ground. Standing in front of him, a small white dog faced off the cats, which hissed and growled at him. Jerry thought about slipping inside, but he could not ignore the small dog that kept him from being attacked. Then, several other dogs arrived, forming a line between Jerry and the cats. The cats began to back off, then turned and ran. The dogs took off after them. Knowing the white dog was safe, he went back inside. What an altogether strange day it was beginning to be, he thought.

Jerry and Jeremy were sitting quietly in the den. Jerry’s father, Jeremy Davis Winslow I, was pacing back and forth in front of them. Dinner had been peaceful and quiet, but there was tension in the house. Jerry could see the worry in Lynn and Lilian’s faces all day. After dinner, Jerry’s mother, Angie, was in the living room with the women while the men had their chat. “So, there were cats too?” the elder Jeremy asked.

“Two, yeah, there were two cats, Dad,” Jerry said. “What the hell is this all about?”

“And a pack of dogs showed up to help you?”

“How many times do we have to go through this, Dad?”

The elder Jeremy sat heavily in an armchair and held his head in his hands, shaking it slowly from side to side. “My dad said this was bound to happen. I prayed to God he was wrong. I’m so sorry.”

“What’s going on, Dad?”

“My dad thought we’d be safe here,” the elder Jeremy said. “I should have known when he was slaughtered in front of us, but I was too young and naive. I forgot the past, and that was my crime. Perhaps if I had remembered, I could have saved him.”

“What are you trying to say, Dad?” Jerry asked.

“Isn’t it obvious, Dad?” little Jeremy said. “It’s all true. My friend Jeremiah was right.”

Jerry’s father showed no expression. He stared at nothing in particular and began, “I was born in the village of Winslow, just to the west of the valley of Thrace on the planet Winterpast. It was such a beautiful place back then, before the invasion by the Empire of Axis. Rolling hills

covered by grass and trees as far as the eye could see. The Winslow River provided fresh water and an abundance of fish. The river and fertile land provided all the sustenance our people would ever need. Back then, I was known as Jeremy Davis Iron-heart of Winslow. Do you know why Grandpa Mort named me Jeremy, and why I have passed on that tradition?" Jerry shook his head slowly from side to side, but little Jeremy was grinning from ear to ear. "We are all named after Jeremiah Beetleweed Mosscatcher. Grandpa Mort said we needed to honor him for everything he did for our family and planet. Clearly, he has continued to watch over us, although even he could not stop Grandpa Mort's murder."

"You have to realize how silly all of this sounds, Dad," Jerry replied. "It would take years traveling at the speed of light to reach the closest star. The technology to do even that is hundreds of years in the future."

"I'm sorry, Jerry, but you are speaking from the framework of what you can see and what you have been taught here. Your viewpoint is constrained by your prejudices. There is a lot more to the universe than what you believe."

Jerry walked over to a cabinet and grabbed two glasses, filling each half full of whisky. He handed one to his father and sipped the other. "Okay then, enlighten me." He sat back on the couch next to his son and crossed his legs.

The elder Jeremy sighed heavily. "We really don't have time for this, especially if cats are now involved. But if you insist, let me give you a taste of reality. First, how many dimensions are there in physical space?"

"Three, right? Height, width and depth."

"Not really," his father noted. "Einstein noted that mass causes those three dimensions to curve. Well then, what do they curve into?" Jerry looked frustrated and stared at his feet, while little Jeremy was day-dreaming. "In the theoretical physics of this time, some scientists claim there must be eleven dimensions, ten physical and one time." He leaned toward the other two and whispered, "You know what? They're right!"

"I'm really confused right now, Dad," Jerry said. "What does all of that mean to us and the danger to our family?"

"Our senses are limited to acknowledging things that share all three of the spatial dimensions we experience. If a thing shared only two of those dimensions, we might see it as an apparition, like a ghost. It looks pretty real until it moves or turns and disappears. If another thing shares only one dimension with us, we might hear or sense something, but we believe it is our imagination. If yet another thing does not share any dimensions with us, we are blissfully unaware of its existence. What makes it even more intriguing is those things have the same experience with us. They are our ghosts and we are their apparitions, and yet, we are all here in this spot at the same moment in time."

"Grandpa," Jeremy interrupted, "the man on the movie called this the Empty Realm. What does that mean?"

"Jeremy, I'm glad you asked. This set of dimensions is enormous, something like ninety billion light-years from edge to edge. There are billions of galaxies, each containing billions of stars and countless trillions of planets. Yet, as your father noted, each star is impossibly far from the next. Most realities are not like this one. When the Emperor's troops discovered it, they realized it would be the perfect place to exile their enemies. Over time, they would forget the other realms and come to believe their own was the only plane of existence. It seems they were right."

“Wouldn’t their friends try to find them and return them to their own home planets?” Jerry asked.

“Yes, but the vastness of this realm makes that task virtually impossible. Take Earth for example. If you were taken from this place and put on a planet in this realm five billion light years away, how long would it take you to find Earth again, even if you could travel from one planet to the next in only seconds? With quintillions of worlds to examine, the task would never end.”

“Then why are we in danger, Dad? Surely, we are just as lost as the other exiles. Why are we a threat?”

“We are not a typical family, Jerry. We are Knights of Winterpast. And we have a permanent links to all the dimensions of creation, both from our own bodies and especially through Jeremiah Beetleweed Mosscatcher.”

“I’m a knight!” little Jeremy announced proudly.

“Dad, I’m an accountant and Jeremy is eight years old. We most certainly are not Knights of Winterpast.”

“Believe what you will, Son, but you are most certainly a knight. As long as you choose to doubt the obvious, we will remain in danger.”

There was a knock at the door and Jerry’s mother, Angie, walked into the room. “Honey, I think we need to stay here a few days.”

“Is something wrong, Mom?” Jerry asked.

Angie walked over to her grandson and took his hands. “Jeremy, it’s your bedtime. Your mom is waiting outside to take you upstairs, okay?”

“But I’m a Knight of Winterpast, Grandma. I shouldn’t have to go to bed early.”

Angie shot an angry look at her husband, and then smiled and said, “Jeremy, it’s a school day tomorrow. Get moving.” He frowned but obeyed. He kissed everyone goodnight and left the room, closing the door after him. “What exactly did you say, Jeremy?”

“Hardly anything, honey, just what they needed to know.”

“Did you talk about the cats or tell them about me?” she asked.

“No, dear.”

“What is all this with cats, Mom?” Jerry asked. “This whole thing is getting pretty weird.”

She sat next to Jerry and put her hand on his knee. “Honey, just let me say that almost all cats are just cats, and almost all dogs are just dogs and leave it at that.”

“Almost all?” Jerry quizzed.

“Virtually all, Jerry,” she replied.

“You two talk in code, did you know that?”

“Son, obviously what your mother is saying is that not all cats and dogs are cats and dogs. Isn’t that clear enough for you?” Jeremy said.

“Then what are they?” Jerry asked.

“Not tonight, Son,” Angie stated. “Tomorrow will be a better day, and you have work too, so we’ll wish you a good night.” She leaned in and kissed his cheek.

“You’re sending me to bed in my own house?”

“Please go help Lynn make up the guest room for us, okay sweetie?” she smiled.

Jerry looked at his parents quizzically for a moment and then gave up arguing. He walked out of the room and slammed the door behind him. “So, why do we need to stay here, Angie?”

“There are at least a hundred cats within half a block. They’ve formed a perimeter around the house. Is that enough reason for you?”

“Oh my God,” Jeremy moaned.

Jerry was fast asleep, but was not having a restful night. He was dreaming about a wall of fire surrounding his house. At first, he noticed the smell of burning wood, but there was something more acrid in the smell that reminded him of the scent he had picked up from Brad Lincoln during their confrontation at the ballpark. He climbed out of bed and could see the flames and black smoke through the windows. All his neighbors’ houses were on fire. Fred Tompkins was pulling his wife through their front door. She lay motionless as Fred tried to revive her. As Jerry watched, a cat, the size of a large dog, pounced on his neighbor’s back and began to bite and rip at his flesh. Fred fought desperately to get the cat off his back. The two rolled around on the grass as the veil of smoke began to obscure them. Then the cat lunged at his neck, sinking its fangs into his throat. Fred let one final gurgling scream and then fell silent and motionless. Jerry’s feet felt frozen to the floor in panic. He had just witnessed a murder and could see all the houses burning to the ground. He wondered how many burned corpses would be found inside those houses. As he stared at the cat, it turned its head and began to stare back at him, its face wet with blood. The cat crouched down and launched itself into the air, flying right toward him. Jerry tried to back away but could not move his feet. The cat crashed through the window, sending shards of glass everywhere.

Jerry sat upright in bed, panting for air and covered in sweat. The room was quiet, the window unbroken, and Lynn was sleeping soundly. He hurried over to the window and saw that everything looked totally normal. He sighed heavily and reprimanded himself for the stupid dream. How could household cats get that big, he asked himself. His heart was pounding and his thoughts were still filled with the nightmare, so he went to check on his family. As soon as he stepped out of the bedroom, his panic returned. Somehow, there was a reddish glow coming from under little Jeremy’s door. The doorknob glowed brightly. He hurried over and put his hand an inch away from the knob. He could feel the heat radiating from the knob and the breath of hot air coming under the door on his bare feet. He pulled off his pajama top and wrapped it around his hand several times as an insulator. He held his breath for a second and grabbed and turned the knob, pushing the door open. The blast of heat from inside the room almost caused him to faint. He pulled off the top from his hand and noticed it was singed. He looked around the room. Jeremy was still sleeping, but had kicked off all the covers. Then he saw them. Ten large cats were sitting around Jeremy’s bed, watching him. They all turned their heads to look at Jerry. The three closest cats stood and began to snarl and hiss at him. Jerry tried to maneuver around the animals to get closer to his son, but the cats moved as one, until they had cornered him. “This has got to be another nightmare,” he said out loud.

“You are such a fool, Knight of Winterpast,” the closest cat said in a human voice that sounded oddly like Brad Lincoln. “The sins of your grandfather have stained your heart, which we are happy to extract from you. Only your deaths can cleanse your souls and release Winterpast from its torment.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Jerry shouted. “And why am I talking to a goddamn cat!”

The cats all looked to their left toward a darkened corner of the room. A tiny white light appeared on the floor. It stretched into a white line about three feet long. The line then stretched up until it formed the photograph-like image of a man. That image then expanded forward until a man wearing a long red hooded robe was standing in the room. The cats had all turned to face the man and were prostrating themselves before him. He smiled and nodded at the cats, and one by

one, they all jumped up on a dresser and out the open window, which then slammed shut after the last cat was gone. "Jeremy Davis Winslow II, Knight of Winterpast, I presume," the man said in a deep, throaty voice.

"And just who the hell are you and why are you in my house?" Jerry exclaimed.

The man pulled his hood off, revealing his head and face. He seemed to be around forty years old, with a few light wrinkles and a bit of gray around the edges of his otherwise brown hair. His eyes were sky blue, almost a bit too light to be real. "Well, I'm more accustomed to deference from my subjects, but yours is a unique case. I am Karl August Galantine Armstrong, Emperor of the Universe."

"Really, Emperor of the Universe," Jerry chuckled. "How come I never heard of you before, if you rule everything?"

"Your stupidity is not my problem, young knight. There are those who will and probably have told you that I am an evil man, but I think it is important for a person to make their own decisions. What do you think?"

"If the cats are an indication, perhaps those others are right?"

"Security for someone in my position is critical. I understand your president has extensive security with and around him at all times, and he only represents a small portion of this one planet."

"Please just tell me what you want, or get out of my house."

"You must be more courteous if you expect to do well in life, Lord Jeremy."

"I am no lord, your Majesty."

The emperor smiled. "I appreciate your kind words, but as a Knight of Winterpast, you are indeed a lord of that realm." He walked over and stood two feet from Jerry and extended his left arm. "I would like to show you some of the reality you have missed, Lord Jeremy. Please put your hand on my arm."

"I don't understand, and why should I trust you?"

"Lord Jeremy, if I had wished harm to you or your family, you would already be dead. You remember the vision I gave you a short while ago, with the fires and the slaughter of your neighbor? That could have been real, if I had wished. You see, you have forgotten the essential skill of folding, and so I wish to teach you and show you a few things, after which you will be returned to your bed safely. You have my word as Emperor of the Universe."

Jerry was convinced this was nothing but another dream. He could either try to force himself awake, which had not worked so far, or could just go along and see what happens. He raised his right hand and set it on the emperor's arm. He held his breath as he felt his body flatten down to two dimensions and then collapse into a line, then a dot and disappeared completely. "That was so cool," little Jeremy said softly after witnessing the exit through half-opened eyes. He promptly fell back asleep.