

The Passage Advocate

The Shimmering Series
Book 1

Eric T. Schönfeld

KWE Publishing

I'd like to thank my parents for encouraging my flights of fancy, those closest to me who stuck by me to light my fires, and the Lord of All who made it possible.

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Prologue

The wind blew wisps of snow in irregular patterns around the sighing pines. Clouds raced along the grey sky, kissing the peaks topped with a frosty wreath of white. The dying sun glistened off the blankets of snow, bidding farewell to a lost season of forgotten warmth. A far-off bird called mournfully in the twilight, echoing softly off the mountains surrounding the valley.

Nicholas heard nor saw any of the beauty around him as he ran hard, the peace from the entire scene completely lost on him. The young lad wept as he raced to reach the upper ridgelines for safety. His lungs burned from the effort as he shuffled his feet through the thin layers of snow, crunching his way up the valley. Rabbit-fur boots and mittens kept him warm, yet his bear fur slowed his progress, making the ascent difficult. He gulped for air, and his breath puffed steadily with each laborious stride.

His dark eyes surveyed the canyon as he ran, desperately searching for where he could discern the trail that would lead him away from town and into the high country. Normally, he used this trail for hunting; today, he needed an escape route.

Below him in the valley, the screams from the dying and the shouts

from the Mongol raiders mingled along with the smoke and flames, wafting into the evening air. The brutal intruders torched his quaint Ural Mountain village from horseback, leaving no one alive. Left alone to fend for himself, Nicholas fled from the mayhem up the valley, dutifully following the directions his father had given to him.

Daring only a brief glimpse back, the flickering firelight glistened on his tear-stained face, providing no warmth and illuminating the horror of his village in flames below.

Visions of his older brother, a ruddier, handsomer version of what he always had hoped his future self might become, floated past his mind's eye. His mother's smiling warm embrace. His father's wise confidence and protection for the family, the teacher of his survival skills. All the comforts of home lost in the flames and the screams wafting skyward before him.

He sobbed as he turned again and ran, weeping aloud for his lost family. His voice became muffled as he ran, barely discernible as the sighing wind carried the sounds of the continuing mayhem from the valley below to his ears, overwhelming his cries. Crossing a frozen creek bed, he struggled to climb higher into the narrowing canyon leading up into the high country. *I must put it out of my mind for now; that's what Father would have me do!*

There would be time for mourning later. As Nicholas pressed on, he knew the lands above town better than anyone, but he would need to push on quickly to gain more distance between himself and the marauders.

"Nyet!" he sniffed as the screams followed after him, wafting up the valley walls around him. Their torturous wails propelled him ever faster, even as the snow drifts deepened, slowing his arduous climb as his sobbing cries mingled with those carried on the winds.

If he could just gain the boulders and crags, he would be more difficult to track. Once in the wilds...

"Psssst!! Hey, Rabbit Boy! Mind sharing some of your furs?" A familiar voice stopped him from behind a nearby tree. The tall form of the town tailor stepped into the light from the forest's edge. Dressed in

a fine white shirt with intricate golden stitching, the bald man with bushy eyebrows shivered in the winter cold. In the chaos of the attack on the town, he had clearly missed taking his coat and gloves.

"You...made it out?" Nicholas could do little more than stare at the man in disbelief.

"Not many of us did," the shivering man replied as he held out a shaking hand, pleading yet coaxing. "Come, child, don't be afraid; you remember me! I traded with your mum and your brother in the market. Share with me some of your furs!"

Nicholas nodded, striding toward the lanky man, yet he stopped suddenly when he was within a few feet of him. The man's intimidating frame towered over him despite being hunched over, struggling to keep warm. Yet just behind the tailor, hidden in the shadows of the trees, two Mongol fighters waited with daggers drawn, watching his approach with wicked intent. The tailor followed Nicholas's line of sight until he realized his entourage had been spotted.

"I told you to stay back until I had him!" the tailor shouted as his feigned shivering ceased. He stood tall, continuing to curse his chastisements at the hidden warriors, his own furs hung just out of sight on the tree behind him.

"You're with them? Why?!" Nicholas gasped, stumbling back in retreat, shocked at the clear betrayal. "You were part of our home! You were part of our town! We welcomed you!"

"They pay better," the tall man sneered. The tailor's vicious smile curled through his lips, his teeth clenched impatiently with the cold. "Now give me your furs, and you can go back to town and warm yourself among the ashes of your dead!"

"Nyet!!!" Nicholas screamed as he turned and ran.

"Come back here, Rabbit Boy!" the tailor yelled after him, drawing a long-serrated blade, hidden from behind him before turning back to his entourage. "Don't just stand there; if he gets away and tells others, your surprise raids on these towns are over!"

Nicholas sprinted as if his life depended on it and soon placed some distance between himself and his pursuers. His lungs burned

with the effort even as the sounds of the pursuit underway echoed off the surrounding cliffs. It seemed hours, yet only minutes had gone by when he rounded the base of a cliff where the valley narrowed. There before him, a misshapen dead oak tree loomed. Its single barren branch seemed to point forlornly up the valley, as if warning him not to stop.

He glanced back and could still hear the fading sounds of mayhem from his village. The marauders pursuing him remained momentarily out of sight but not out of earshot, the sound of their pursuit intensifying with each passing second. Wide-eyed and shaking in fear, Nicholas clambered around the base of the oak when he gasped.

There, extended from the foot of the tree's two large roots, an inky black shadow roiling within the space between them. Resembling a pool of oil, it pulsed once with a crimson light, rippling without wind once before it stilled, as if suddenly sensing his approach. When he moved to step around it, the sludge slid toward him, and he backed away.

Nicholas rubbed his eyes in disbelief, and the sludge rippled in anticipation before flattening back into place, an opaque and placid enigma with a flat surface. *How easily it blended into the shadows; how easy to miss the presence of...what is that, anyway?!*

Deciding not to trust the strange shadow, Nicholas searched frantically for another hiding place. Spotting a large boulder above the trail, he swiftly took refuge there, careful to utilize stones, logs and brush to limit tracks in the snow.

Just as he ducked into hiding, the tailor followed by the other two Mongols arrived, one now carrying a lit torch. Nicholas could clearly see the bloodstained savagery on their furs cast by the light of the flickering torch.

Speaking in their guttural tongue, they began circling the oak, using the torch to illuminate the branches. The inky shadow at the base of the tree remained still despite the direct light from the torch, glistening as if frozen.

The tailor noticed it too and motioned to his companions. They stared at it dumbly as the torchbearer held the light closer; then, it

moved. Akin to molasses, it pooled into the corner where the roots met before sliding up the crevices of the tree in a morose reverse drip. Like an oily patch of night, it clung stubbornly to its space, refusing to give further ground to the men and only retreating from light directly threatening to pierce it.

“Whatever it is doesn’t like the light,” the tailor muttered in fascination as he reached toward the shadow to probe it with his blade. That’s when the shadow struck: whipping upright, past his blade and up his arm, wrapping itself around him up to his shoulder, curling around his appendage like a snake.

The tall man gasped as the shadow stretched itself into a fluidic arch, wrapping itself first around the tailor’s arm and then gushing forth over his head and neck. He dropped his knife, gagging and tearing at his face, screaming aloud as it seemed to affix itself around his neck and ears.

“Get it off! Get it off! Get it...” The tailor’s shouts rang out initially as his Mongol accomplices stared wide-eyed and uncertain.

The shadow enveloped the man’s head, gushing around his mouth and muffling his screams as he gagged before seeming to suddenly flow into his ears, nose and mouth.

The Mongol soldiers stepped back, perplexed and dumbfounded at their companion, splayed out on the ground and twitching in the snow, belching sounds that shouldn’t come from a human body. Nicholas recoiled in horror but remained quiet as the tailor’s convulsions subsided into vibrating tremors as all fell silent around them.

One of the men prodded his fallen comrade when suddenly, the downed man’s eyes snapped open, pulsing a hellish red glow. With inhuman speed, the tailor grabbed his companion by the head and snapped his neck, throwing him aside. The other Mongol jumped back, dropping his torch as the crazed tailor leapt to his feet and lunged at the other man’s throat.

The crimson-eyed tailor pinned the other Mongol warrior down, knocking him to the ground. As the struggle ensued, the fighter managed to grab the tailor’s knife out of his belt and stab him once in

the thigh. The tailor made no sound or even grimace at the knife wound as he mercilessly squeezed his companion's throat. The red glow from his eyes pulsed as he strangled the Mongol thrashing beneath him. The warrior's gasps turned to death throes as he gurgled, final convulsions taking his body before expiring along with the torch lying beside them.

Nicholas wanted to scream but forced himself to stay still, cowering behind the boulder. As the tailor stood, his glowing red eyes scanned around the narrow gulley, a predator searching for prey. For terrible long moments, the crazed man searched for the lad, withdrawing the knife from his leg without so much as a wince, sliding it free almost as an afterthought. The wound dribbled briefly before black tar oozed alongside the blood to seal it.

The tailor's crimson eyes fixed on the rock where Nicholas hid, and he hissed with satisfied glee. Although unseen and out of sight, Nicholas knew he had been found, bolting from his hiding place and sprinting straight up the canyon without looking once behind him.

Possessed with predatory purpose, the tailor gurgled once and limped after him, arm outstretched as if to grasp him from afar. As he pursued Nicholas, the plastered smile left his face, and a new fiery, hateful look possessed him. A loud metallic moan bellowed forth, chilling the lad far more than the frozen landscape around him.

Nicholas tore through the deepening snow drifts as he climbed higher up the canyon, not bothering to turn to see whether the possessed tailor followed, knowing he did. With his last remaining strength, he scrambled higher, the grade steepening as he went. His lungs stung from the effort as he pressed onto the only safety he knew—the wilds of the highlands.

Tears of agony flowed anew as terror ran through him; how he wished his father or brother were here with him! Tiring quickly, he knew he would not be able to continue much further and had to find another place to hide. Fleeing the barbarian attack was one thing, but whatever was pursuing him now was clearly much more than simply a man.

The effort seemed to have paid off; when Nicholas looked back, he had temporarily lost sight of the pursuing tailor. Ahead of him and at the head of the valley, a frozen waterfall offered yet another possible hiding place.

Glancing worriedly over his shoulder to ensure he hadn't been spotted, Nicholas pressed himself between the giant icicles and slippery rocks, attempting to gain the inner recesses of the alcove behind them. Sliding precipitously on an icy rock, he went down hard, bashing his head on a stone.

Nicholas cried out as water and ice spilled over him, mixing with his blood as the frozen creek soaked him to the bone. Dizziness overwhelmed him as he regained his footing. Struggling upright to his feet, he limped onward, pushing behind the ice to a darkened alcove. Soaking wet and bleeding, he looked around, bewildered at how quickly his options dwindled with each passing moment.

A quick survey behind the curtain of ice revealed a cluster of branches, half frozen in the creek and jammed between rocks. He grunted as he pulled forth a long branch resembling a staff. His teeth chattered as hypothermia set in and the world began to spin.

Nicholas's head throbbed as he pushed into a gap, towing his makeshift staff with him. From behind a pair of frozen roots and between the ice stalactites of the waterfall, he could peek through to the canyon he had just climbed. He took a moment to catch his breath, shivering from the cold. *Perhaps this isn't such a good idea after all, but there's nowhere else to go!*

The thought pushed Nicholas further back into the alcove, nestled between the roots. He almost cried aloud when the roots parted, and he nearly fell through. Squinting behind him to see, it was impossible to tell in the darkness just how deep this cave went. Whispers of warning from his father to stay away from unknown caves surfaced, so he sufficed himself with his current station, behind the cover of the frozen waterfall to spy on his pursuer.

With nothing to do but wait, tormenting memories of what he had lost flooded him through the cold and darkness. His brother, Peter, and

his father had gone to see the very merchant now pursuing him to trade furs only just this morning. His mother had been at home, cooking the rabbits he had trapped yesterday. His quaint home and the surrounding farms were all lost now to the invading horsemen; the tailor had apparently been helping all along.

Nicholas had heard the screams after the horsemen had galloped into town later that day. He was still dressed for the cold from his earlier hunting trip to obtain more rabbits. His bloodied father had stumbled home amongst the chaos and told him to run for the high country.

He never questioned his father, not ever. Only now in the darkened alcove did he begin to question that decision. Bitter tears flowed as he gripped his staff in anguish; he was sure some of the screams he had heard were theirs.

The sound of footsteps crunching through the snow outside caught Nicholas's attention, stealing the last vestiges of his thoughts as the landscape settled into a disquieting hush. Holding his breath, he stared out between the icy roots at the empty ravine. In the sudden silence, all he could hear was the pursuer's footsteps and the quickening of his own heartbeat, even as the methodical footsteps slowed.

In the fading evening light, the hunched tailor emerged into sight at the far end of the canyon, sniffing the air like a wild animal as he strode forth. As the red-eyed man wandered closer, Nicholas could see that cold seemed to have no effect on him. The tall man's blazing gaze scanned the ravine patiently, searching for his prey as steam rose from his skin and torn shirt.

Then, their eyes met.

The same knowing smile crept over the tailor's face, but in a metallic voice not his own, he cooed to Nicholas, slowly creeping to close the distance between them. He called to the lad with a gentle voice despite brandishing his short hunting blade.

"Come here, little boy, I've got something for you!" a deep voice rumbled, coming from the tailor, yet his lips never moved. As he reached for the lad the towering man began to tremble with a barely

containable excitement, a spittle of black drool forming along his lips. "Don't hide from me! I have someone who wants to meet you! Just...a bit closer now; come here! There's no need to fear; you are special! We need you! We want you! We must have you!"

"Nyet!!!" Nicholas sobbed as his knees began to buckle. He gripped his staff before him, trembling in fear and cold, striking out frantically as instinct took over. "Leave me alone! Get away from me!!"

The tailor began to grab at the icicles from the waterfall, ripping them free with his bare hands, tearing at the cave's entrance with frenzied glee. Nicholas began screaming, jabbing futilely at his attacker between the gnarled roots and icicles.

This seemed to only encourage his attacker more as he broke a large section of ice free, tossing it aside before pushing his pale face into the hole he made. The man's eyes blazed beneath his bristly eyebrows as he called to Nicholas in that deceptively gentle voice that wasn't his own.

"I won't hurt you!" The voice from nowhere and yet everywhere assaulted him. His lips parted, and his teeth gnashed in frustration as he grasped for the lad, a dark spittle dripping down his chin. The tailor's breath assailed his senses, smelling sickly sweet as if with the scent of rotting meat. "Just...come...here..."

Nicholas struck with everything left in him, shoving the staff straight into the tailor's nose, cracking it and spurting blood in all directions. The man staggered back, screaming and clutching his face, the red glow briefly fading from his eyes.

"Wait! Don't leave me!" the man whimpered as if suddenly scared, looking about as if he had lost something before turning his attention back to Nicholas. "What have you done?! I...can't...feel my...oh, wait...there you are!"

The crimson light suddenly returned to the man's eyes, blazing with fury as the tailor went berserk, moaning aloud with a metallic roar and tearing at the remaining icicles and even at the roots to get to Nicholas. The explosion of ice and wood from his frenzy sent Nicholas tumbling backward into the cave, dropping his makeshift staff as he fell.

The man lunged again, leaping into Nicholas's enclosure. The

crimson glow from the tailor's eyes illuminated their faces inside the cave as the man pressed himself atop him.

"I have you now," the strange voice whispered even as the tailor grinned without moving his lips. The towering man pushed his face closer, his blood mingling with that same black ichor and dripping from his lips. Nicholas could smell his breath, that same rancid odor, and he turned to retch from the overwhelming stench.

Pinned down, Nicholas could do little as he screamed as suddenly, rocks and mud began to fall from the cave ceiling, dislodged with their struggle. As the avalanche of debris continued, the floor seemed to collapse as well, yawning open beneath them.

With a sudden crash, he fell away from his attacker. Down into a dark abyss they plunged, falling together. He could still make out his attacker's luminous eyes, falling after him but quickly vanishing as they separated, falling in different directions. *How large is this cave? Where are we falling to?*

The air grew strangely warm, accompanied by the smell of rich, deep earth...a strange white light flashed, seeming to come from everywhere at once...a vortex spinning him in a whirlpool...he screamed again, but his voice seemed to reflect back to him, folding on itself.

All the while, another watchful pair of eyes observed his fall, the image of it spiraling away, as if down a drain...