

Lightbringers and Lamplighters

An Adventure of Change

Steven List

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my wife, Debbie. It's not easy being a sometime-observer and sometime-passenger and sometime-critic on someone else's journey of discovery. Debbie has been through it all, as long as we define "all" as meaning that she's remained married to me for all these years, in spite of all of the challenges. She is patient, thoughtful, passionate, caring and nurturing, and I can always count on her to ask me the difficult questions and challenge me to ask them of myself.

I love you always.

Steven, January 2012

Prologue

“It is time,” said the first voice.

“Do you really think so?” asked a second voice.

“Indeed, it is time,” said a third.

“And how shall we proceed?” asked the second voice.

“A child has been born,” said the first voice, “and chosen. He will serve our purposes quite nicely.”

“He will know the purpose, and recognize the time, even if he does not know the why of it,” said the third voice.

“So be it,” said the second voice.

And there was silence and agreement and it was begun.

Chapter 1. Huddlers

Ham felt the sweat dripping down his back as he swung the axe overhead. In his mind's eye, he could see the sweat clearing a path through the dirt and dust that settled on his back as he worked. He took some pride in the smooth play of the muscles in his shoulders, chest, and back as he continued to split logs for firewood for the village. Each time was the same – place the log end up on the splitting trunk, take the axe firmly – first with his left hand, then with his right – swing the axe around his right side and overhead, and then the solid, smooth swing downward ending in the satisfying *ka-thunk* as the log split in two.

Ham had been splitting firewood since he was old enough to swing his first, smaller axe, and it had always given him a quiet sense of satisfaction. His father had taught him the right way to grip the axe, the right way to swing it up and then down, the right way to place the log, and the rhythm that made it all move so smoothly.

On this day, as on most other days, his father – Horace – worked at his own splitting trunk not far away. Their rhythms worked in counterpoint to make a calming rhythm. *Ka-thunk, ka-thunk*, sometimes together, sometimes apart.

The work took no thought, so Ham used the time when his body worked so smoothly to think. This was one of the things that set Ham apart from the other Huddlers of the village of Dusk. In fact, Ham had always felt somewhat apart from the other Huddlers of Dusk.

To begin with, Ham had always been a bit taller than most Huddlers. Not head-and-shoulders taller, but just enough that he was always looking down on the other Huddlers. Because of the physical nature of his work, Ham's shoulders began broadening early, and his back was strong and straight. All of this made him seem just a bit taller than he already was.

Ham's hair was different, too. Huddlers, as a people, had lifeless, muddy brown hair that always seemed to just lay there. Whether the day was calm or windy, Huddler hair found its place and gloomily stayed there. By contrast, Ham's hair had a sheen, a slight golden tinge to it that seemed to catch every errant sunbeam or moonglow. The gleam was just enough that the other Huddlers in Dusk could see him coming from a distance. Not content to stay put, Ham's hair moved with the breeze and flowed in the light.

And then, there were Ham's eyes. Possessed of a warm radiance, they were like the eyes of the other Huddlers, only in that they were brown. But while the

other Huddlers' eyes were a muddy brown just like their muddy brown hair, Ham's eyes were brighter. Sometimes, in the right light, small, floating golden flecks appeared.

Unfortunately for Ham, different was bad in Dusk. The folk of Dusk mistrusted different, as did most of the folk in the land of Dank.

The other children of Dusk avoided Ham in small and large ways. Sometimes, when he would walk by, they would just turn away, ever so slightly. At playtime, they would often deliberately exclude him.

Ham was never bitter or angry, but these slights did not go unnoticed and there had always been a small sadness in him.

As Ham chopped wood, this sadness would sometimes sing a soft song to him. As Ham smelled the rich scent of the wood, feeling the smooth play of his muscles and the sweat dripping down his back to plop in the dirt at his feet, he would listen and wonder why he was different.

Chapter 2. Dank

Ham's village of Dusk was a part of the land of Dank. In Dank, it was always dim and dreary. The sun, when it managed to peek through the ever-present overcast, was weak, wan and woeful. The inhabitants of Dank – the Huddlers – went through their days with their heads down, their shoulders hunched, and with a look of fear and anxiety shrouding their faces from waking to sleeping. Whenever possible – when they weren't working, schooling, or doing chores – they would spend their time together, huddled against the darkness. And their dreams were, as you might imagine, dark, dim and dreary.

For the most part, Huddlers spent their time on the necessities of life: growing and gathering food, patching together clothing, and fixing leaks in the roofs of their homes. As much as possible, they did their chores together, huddled, feeling hopeless.

Nothing ever changed in the land of Dank. The Huddlers lived in the homes that their parents and grandparents and great-grandparents had lived in. They grew and gathered their food from the same fields and trees and in the same way as the generations before them. When one of their homes was damaged, they used the same tools, in the same way, to make

repairs. No one had had a new idea, or come up with a new way of doing things, in living memory. And the Huddlers had very good memories. Of course, they didn't have a lot to remember, since things just didn't change.

Chapter 3. Hyram

Hyram was Mayor of Dusk. Hyram was Mayor because his father had been Mayor, and his father's father had been Mayor, and so on back up Hyram's family tree.

Hyram was an average looking Huddler: average height, mousy brown hair that lay where it fell and stayed there, brown watery eyes that mostly looked down, and a bit of a pot-belly – the kind that looked like he'd swallowed a medium-sized melon and it got stuck.

Hyram was responsible for enforcing the laws of Dusk, providing wise counsel to the Huddlers of Dusk, and overseeing the well-being of the community of Dusk. There weren't many laws, of course, since things hadn't changed much. Hyram's wise counsel wasn't in great demand, since the denizens of Dusk knew pretty much everything there was to know about life in their village.

Most of the time, Hyram huddled with his fellow denizens of Dusk, looking fearfully at the surrounding dim, dark dreariness. Once in a while, he had to resolve a petty dispute. At those times, Hyram relied on the knowledge that had come down to him from generations of Dusk Huddlers. Actually, the Huddlers

of Dusk knew what Hyram knew, but they liked to make Hyram feel good about himself now and then.

On those rare occasions when Hyram was called upon to decide an issue, he would always take a deep breath, draw back his shoulders, and begin with “Hrm-mm-mm...” His eyes would bulge a bit, as though the pressure building up in his head was about to push out through his eyes.

This didn’t happen often.

Chapter 4. Dusk

Life was dull in Dusk. Entertainment was rare, and usually took the form of singing the Birthday Dirge. Everyone knows the Birthday Dirge. It goes like this...

“Hap... py birth... day... to... youuuu-
uuuuu...”

“Hap... py birth... day... to... youuuu-
uuuuu...”

And so on. Slow, mournful, as though each reminder of another year passed is just another year of collecting dust, approaching death, and dragging dreariness. And that's the best that the Huddlers of Dusk could manage for entertainment.

Work was just work for the Huddlers. Repetitive. The Huddlers of Dusk did what they needed to do to feed and clothe themselves and keep their homes from leaking or falling down. They didn't sing or whistle while they worked, because they didn't find any real joy in what they were doing. In fact, it's not at all clear that anyone in Dusk knew how to whistle.

Huddlers learned what to do from their parents, who had learned from their parents, who had learned

from... And they did it the same way, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year.

There was no innovation in Dusk.

Chapter 5. Home

Ham lived with his mother, Hannah, and his father, Horace. Their home was a typical Huddler home, with packed dirt floors, cast iron sinks, off-white walls, thatched roof, and an oh-my-goodness-that's-chilly toilet. Along with Hannah, Horace, and Ham, there was Ham's sister Helen and their dog Hank, a mutt of unknown origin.

Ham's family was like most of the other Huddler families in Dusk. When not splitting wood, Horace gathered food, did repairs and maintenance around their small home, and occasionally shared his woes with some of the other husbands and fathers in the village. Hannah washed their clothes (although they were so overall drab and dingy that you might never know), cooked their meals (which all seemed to look and taste very much alike), and cared for their occasional ills.

Helen, a youngster of 15, went to the one-room schoolhouse with the other children of Dusk, dragging her feet and her books all the way there and back. There wasn't a lot to learn, but they all went to school because... well, because. She never could figure it out.

Ham was different. No one could account for it, since there hadn't been anyone or anything different in

Dusk in the long memories of the denizens of Dusk.
And yet, at 21, Ham was different.

Ham was one of the few imaginative Huddlers, occasionally having a vision of something more. When the sun made one of its rare appearances, Ham would tell his friends and neighbors the tale of his vision.

Chapter 6. Ham's Dream

As far back as he could remember Ham had had the same dream. While this was just one more thing that set him apart, he nonetheless would share the dream with other Huddlers from time to time.

“One day, a man comes to Dusk. Since no one ever comes to Dusk, everyone comes out into the center of the village to see. This man strides into Dusk. Since we all kind of shuffle along from thing to thing, striding causes a stir, and everyone starts to whisper and mumble.

“And then we notice that this man is tall. Not just a little bit taller, not just enough so that your eyes are looking at his nose, but tall. His chin is just about at the spot between my eyes, and since I’m just a bit taller than everyone else, that makes him tall.

“As he stands there and we’re all staring at him, the sun blasts through the clouds, so bright we can almost hear it. As if this wasn’t enough to make everyone stand still and silent, the light slaps the man on the head and we see _red. Not brown – not mousy brown or dirt brown or tree-bark-brown or muddy brown – but red. Shocking red, shouting red, stunning red._

“And then the man smiles. Oh, how white his teeth are. How wide his smile. How joyful and bright and uplifting that smile is. As I look at him, I know that he is here to bring us something new, something that will change our lives in ways we can’t even imagine.

“The man looks at each of us. I mean he really looks at each of us, one by one. As he looks, we each see that his eyes are golden, shining, and it feels as if there’s a private connection from his eyes to each of ours. I watch as he looks around at the Huddlers of Dusk, one by one, and I see each of you start to smile. Each of you stands up just a little taller and your hair seems to glow just a little bit, and your shoulders go back just a little bit.

“He opens his mouth to speak, and we each hold our breath and lean forward just a bit and...”

This is the point where Ham’s dream ends. He’s had the dream more than once, and each time, it ends at this point.

Ham is both frustrated and excited. He knows that there’s something important in this dream. He knows that if he can just hear what the man is going to say that the lives of all the Huddlers in Dusk will be changed forever.

Sometimes, when Ham thinks of the dream, he cries in frustration.

The other Huddlers of Dusk, each time they hear Ham tell of his dream, shake their heads, mumble into their hands, and shuffle away.