

## **The Phantoms of the Light and Darkness**

by Boyd

Lucas and Nicolas weren't supposed to play around the mine. It was a very important rule that their father Thomas had repeatedly told them. He'd tell them that it wasn't a real mine, just an overgrown hole that greedy men had dug out to find gold. In the years since gold was discovered in California, more and more people like Thomas and his boys had come to find gold, gold that was getting harder and harder to find. So people would get desperate and reckless and begin making mines into hillsides. Or people would get sad and drink, like Thomas.

Lucas and Nicolas didn't like to see their father sad. Nicolas had said that if they could find some gold, that maybe their father would be happy again, like when their mother was alive. Lucas always listened to his brother, and so they made plans. One fateful day, while their father was sleeping off another bottle, the two boys went to the mine, determined to find gold and make him happy.

The mine was as bad as Thomas had described – a hole tunneled into the hillside barely big enough for a man to crawl through, with supports made from aged, scavenged wood and rock piles. But the mine was just the right size for two determined boys. Nicolas bravely went first, even though he was afraid of the dark. But he was the older brother, and he had to brave for Lucas. Nicolas held on the lantern extra tight and he entered the tunnel.

Lucas followed his brother closely, dragging the pickaxes they'd borrowed behind him. He didn't like it in the tunnel either, but he wanted to be a good brother. No matter what, he'd follow Nicolas anywhere, even a dark old scary tunnel.

What happened next is hard to say. It could be one of the axes Lucas was dragging caught on a pile of rocks and pulled them loose. Or maybe one of the support beams made from old wagon boards finally gave way. Whatever the cause, the tunnel suddenly shook and the ceiling fell in on Nicolas and Lucas.

Nicolas was overwhelmed by the speed and sound of the collapsing ceiling. He barely noticed as he was pinned to the ground. But when the dust settled, Nicolas was left with his head and left arm free, and the lantern sitting in front of him, still burning, still giving off its precious light.

Lucas wasn't so lucky – the ceiling had covered him completely in dirt. Blind and breathing dirt, Lucas desperately reached out to find something, anything that he could use to free himself. He tore at the dirt with his fingers, trying to claw his way loose. He prayed that Nicolas would dig him out soon, thinking that his brother wouldn't let him die like this.

But Nicolas wasn't thinking about his brother or getting free or anything other than the lantern. The burning lantern, the only source of light in the mine, was the only thing that kept the

terrifying darkness away. His eyes grew wide with fear as Nicolas watched the lantern's light flicker in the dwindling air. His eyes fixed on the brightest part of the flame, numb with fear from the cold earth pinning him down, the thinning air, even the fingers scraping against the soles of his shoes.

Nicolas watched the light grow dimmer and dimmer and began praying that the light would keep burning. Fear clenched at him and he began wishing that someone would keep that light burning. As the darkness grew, he began screaming for anyone or anything that would keep the light burning.

And the darkness answered back, with subtle whispers in reply for Nicolas' screams. In soothing tones, the darkness said that it could keep the light burning. In fact, it said, it could always keep Nicolas in the light. It could make him feel eternally safe and warm in the light, it whispered. Nicolas screamed, "Yes!" with the last of his breath. The darkness hissed that would be a price, but Nicolas didn't care - anything was better than the dark. And the darkness laughed softly as a deal was struck.

The next morning, the sight of Nicolas walking out of the cave would startle onlookers. The witnesses said that he no longer looked quite human – pale and glowing, with inhuman features. They said he was glowing with a blinding light that left you cold when you looked at it. And he stood there in the sun, soaking up the light, oblivious to everything around him, until Lucas came from out of the mine.

You see, the darkness had made a second deal that night in the cave. They had whispered in Lucas' ear as well, offering him a chance to be free and follow his brother forever. And when Lucas said yes, he was reborn as a walking shadow – a perpetual patch of darkness that seemed to absorb all the light around him. Lucas didn't care – he just wanted to be free and hug his brother again.

And so when the dark man walked from the mine towards him, the glowing man panicked. His old fears were still there, and now the darkness was walking deliberately towards him. With an inhuman scream, the glowing man took off to the skies, flying away from the dark shadow. Confused, the shadow flew off after the glowing man in pursuit until they both disappeared from sight.

Nicolas and Lucas would be seen again over the years, in terrifying encounters during the day and night. Their old names were forgotten, and today they are known as the Phantoms of the Light and Darkness. The Phantom of Light still hunts for the brightest light, while the Phantom of Darkness still chases the Light, but not remembering why. All it knows is that the dark always follows the light.