

# ONE

**B**rian Thatz noticed he was being followed as he walked from his cello lesson to the old office building where he played interdimensional games.

At first, it was just a feeling that someone was watching. He pushed his glasses more securely onto the bridge of his nose and looked around. No one seemed suspicious. There were some other students with violins and guitars hopping down the steps of the music school. A crossing guard. Two women in high heels, wobbling on the brick sidewalks.

So Brian kept walking, dragging his cello. Sometimes he wished he'd chosen a smaller instrument. Even the viola would have been better.

But there was the feeling again — like someone lightly touching his back, a gaze lingering on his collar, on his neck, on the fringe of hair coming out from under his baseball cap.

He frowned and glanced at the windows he passed to see if they reflected signs of movement.

Nothing. But the feeling persisted. He kept going for a block or two, then turned.

This time, he saw who was following him.

The man wore a camel-hair overcoat and carried nothing in his hands. His face, at a distance, was a violent and bloody red.

Brian loved to read old detective stories with names like *The Gimleyhough Diamond*, *A Wee Case of Murder*, and *What Goes Up*. In these books, people were always being hired to follow other people. They called it “shadowing,” and the creeps who shadowed were called “shadows” or “tails.”

Brian’s shadow was not very good at remaining unseen. The man clearly was used to following sly, nimble victims who slipped through crowds and darted down alleyways. He wasn’t particularly gifted when it came to lurking behind a stocky boy struggling down the street with a cello. The shadow had to make frequent stops so he wouldn’t walk right past Brian. He had to pretend he was interested in birds.

There were plenty of birds. It was early summer in Cambridge, and the Common was alive with them. An oak shuffled with finches. Brian saw the tail pause about fifteen feet back to shield his eyes and admire them. The man’s red face was riddled with old pockmarks, scumbled like cottage cheese.

While the tail watched the finches, Brian decided to make a break for the subway station. He lifted his cello — cranking up his elbows — and hopped across the puddles. For blocks, he puffed and hauled.

Even he could tell his burst of speed was pathetic. College students taking a brisk stroll walked right past him. Bicyclists nearly ran into him. The tail kept ambling along across the Common, fascinated by jays, looking fitfully at the dirty sky, slightly embarrassed to be so visible.

The tail followed Brian past a bus stop, past an old graveyard, past a church and a drunken busker playing the accordion. The man followed him past a newsstand and down the escalators to the T, Boston's subway.

When the train pulled into the station and the doors hissed and rattled open, Brian lunged into the nearest car. He rested his back against one of the poles and twisted his neck to look out. The tail was headed along the platform, straight for the same car. The man stepped in at the other end and stood staring, unperturbed. No longer, apparently, so interested in birds.

"Ashmont train," the voice on the loudspeaker said. "Stand clear of the doors. Stand clear."

Brian flung himself toward the doors as they shut. He hauled his cello behind him.

His cello got tangled with the pole and seat. Brian tripped and almost fell.

"Whoa," said a kid in a hoodie, gripping Brian's shoulder. "Steady."

Now there was no way he could get off in time. The doors were closed. The train pulled out of the station. The tail stared down the car as if Brian were a natural event he was watching. They all raced through tunnels, wheels screaming.

Brian knew who might have sent the man to shadow

him. Nearly a year before, Brian and his friend Gregory had gone on a strange adventure in the northern woods of Vermont. They had found themselves the pawns in an ancient, supernatural game that led to mountaintops, caverns, and ogres. When Brian won the Game, he had also won the right to oversee the Game's next round. Now he suspected that the tail who now stood a few feet from him had been sent by the Thusser, the elfin nation that had lost that contest. Perhaps they were trying to gain some advantage.

Maybe this man, the shadow with clotted cheeks, was sent to find out where Brian's workshop was hidden. Several days a week after school, Brian went to an old office building, where he and Gregory set up the next round of the Game, making up riddles and designing monstrosities. Maybe the Thusser were trying to catch a glimpse of Brian's plans.

Or maybe they sought revenge.

Brian thought carefully about what to do. He prided himself on always being rational and logical. He knew that in a few stops, the T train would shoot briefly above-ground. It would cross a bridge over the Charles River, and for a minute or so, his phone would work. He decided he would call Gregory and tell him he wasn't going to the workshop today. He'd ask Gregory to meet him at a different stop instead, and they'd both just walk back to Brian's house. That way they wouldn't be giving the tail any new information. There was nothing secret about Brian's own address. It could be found by anyone with a phone book and thumbs.

Brian took his phone out of his pocket. He waited for the train to rise out of the tunnel. He anxiously flipped the phone open and closed, open and closed.

As the subway neared the mouth of the tunnel, he speed-dialed Gregory. He held the phone up to his ear. It was ringing.

The tail watched Brian call. His blotched lips started to move, as if he whispered information to someone who couldn't be seen. He closed his eyes.

The train rolled across a dark granite bridge between black turrets. The city of Boston was spread out on its hill. Sailboats were on the river, and people were jogging along the banks. Brian knew he only had about forty-five seconds. The phone was still ringing.

The train stopped at the Charles Street station. People got on and off, hefting backpacks. Brian hunched over the phone, shielding his face with his cello, which rested between his legs and the grasp bar. The phone rang on.

Then, finally, someone answered.

“Hey,” said Gregory’s voice. “Listen to this.”

“No, Gregory,” whispered Brian urgently. “There’s someone following me. Can you meet me at —”

There was a squalling noise at the other end of the phone, a vicious hissing, a crash.

“Did you hear that?” Gregory said. “I put the cat on my dad’s turntable. Like, for vinyl.”

“Yeah. Gregory, I’m being followed. One of the Thusser, I think. Can you meet me at —”

There was another sharp *hiss*, another *thump*.

Gregory came back on the phone. “Side B,” he explained.

“Gregory, *listen!*”

“How did people ever think that was a high-definition sound system?”

“Gregory, I need you to meet me at —”

The train sped back underground. Brian shouted the name of a stop, but his phone had already lost its signal.

He was on his own.

He hated that. It was much easier to be brave when there was someone else to rely on. Brian was used to relying on Gregory. Nervously rocking the handle of his cello case back and forth, he considered what he was going to do.

He was supposed to change trains at the next stop, Park Street, where a lot of people stepped off the train or on. But he stayed put, half an eye turned to watch his pursuer. He thought to himself grimly that this was not the first time the Thusser had tailed him on a train. That was how the Game had begun. It had ended with the Thusser agent trying to kill Brian on the floor of a subterranean cathedral. Just thinking about it made Brian panic.

He waited two stops. Then, at the third, just as people were scrambling for seats and the doors were about to close — at the very last minute — Brian seized his cello and forced his way out onto the platform.

The rush-hour crowd was all around him. They still fought to get onto the train. He dodged between them, yanking the cello clumsily behind him. He looked back and saw the camel-hair shadow shoving his way out through

the doors, peering around the station. Brian ducked and, slanting the cello like artillery, moved along the wall. He found a column and hid behind it.

He waited. The train pulled away. Another train pulled in. He heard the doors open and people get out. He heard the subterranean voice of the conductor announce the line and the next station. The doors shut. The train moved on.

There was now an awful wailing. It was not the train shrieking on the rails. It was human. Carefully, Brian peered around the column.

The platform was almost empty. The tail stood, looking at Brian's column. Between them stood a freckled man with a baby in a backpack. The noise was the baby bawling, red faced.

The four of them stood for a long time that way. The shadow couldn't do a thing with a witness standing there. The baby kept screaming. Its face was turning purplish. The freckled father glanced at the man in the camel-hair coat, glanced at Brian. He looked nervous. He could tell something was going on.

Brian stared back at the shadow defiantly. Or at least he hoped he looked defiant. In truth, he was desperately agonizing over how he would lose the man while still dragging his cello with him — trying to dodge through crowds, up and down subway stairs, and along the sidewalks of Brookline.

The baby sobbed on.

The man in the camel-hair coat gave Brian a final, hateful look, then turned and walked off. He trudged up the stairs.

Brian's shoulders sagged with relief. His cello dipped. He realized that it had been sticking out from behind the column the whole time, completely obvious. He was awful at hiding.

He pulled the cello around the pillar and stood with his back against the concrete, waiting for another train. He tried to shut out the baby's anguished wail, which blared and boomed in the tunnel.

He was almost relieved when the baby stopped to gag and cough.

But it was at that moment that he heard the shadow talking to people on the stairs. "You can't go down there," said the shadow. "Police. Sorry, ma'am. Police. This station is closed. We're having a situation."

A woman said, "I have to go pick up salmon."

"You won't be leaving from this station, ma'am. We're engaged in an activity."

*Why, thought Brian, is he shooing people away?*

And then he looked at the freckled man, the baby in the backpack. The man was walking toward him, head sinking down between his shoulders. The baby screamed, red, blotchy, and bald.

No one was coming down the stairs. There wouldn't be any witnesses.

Brian's heart swung a beat and began to pound.

The baby's mouth spread wide, too wide for any human mouth. Though it was an infant, it had rows and rows and rows of teeth.

It looked very hungry.