

SoulChaser: Conquest Earth Trilogy  
Volume 2: Heaven's Eyes

a supernatural thriller  
by Jason A. Anderson

Spreading the divine battle of angels and demons across multiple worlds, the SoulChaser universe paints everyday life on Earth against a much larger canvas. When the stakes are eternal, death is one small step on a giant ladder.

- James Wymore, Author of the Actuator Series

*Hell has come to Shadow Valley... and the town doesn't even know it, yet.*

Prologue

**Somewhere in the air over Central California, USA**

*The bright crimson stream arched over head. The putrid stench of decay mixed with the smell of rusting metal permeated the air. A screaming guitar riff bled into a woman's shrieking wail as Vein Drain's shock-metal anthem "Blood On the Waters" pulsed and echoed around him like a living creature.*

*Blood, thick and wet, pooled around his plain brown shoes... dripped from the ceiling above onto his ordinary gray coat... rivulets streamed down the pale wall, like crimson tear streaks on the face of an innocent child.*

*As the song's menacing lyrics unwound, a phantasmagoric montage of images played out in his mind. A man's severed hand, two embracing children turned to stone, the luminescent outline of a dragon embryo as seen through the egg's thinning shell, an emaciated alchemist slowly lowering a lump of lead into a burbling cauldron.*

*From somewhere lightning flashed, changing the scope of the Technicolor masquerade all around him.*

*"Mr. Andrews?" A woman's gentle voice came through to him almost as a faint echo on the wind.*

*A holiday clown with a white face, colorful stripes streaking back from its eyes, a big red nose and wild red hair... its mouth, a silver zipper, splitting into blood-dripping laughter.*

"Mr. Andrews, are you alright?" Her soft voice again, though this time the concern it held cut straight through the wailing winds.

*Now he lay on his back, staring up at a guillotine blade poised above him... the gleaming silver streaked crimson exactly where it would sever his own head from his shoulders. The wooden collar which locked his head into place offered no leniency as he thrashed around, trying to wrest himself free from it, but the heavy iron shackles secured his limbs and torso to the guillotine table. His gaze turned sharp as a razor's edge when he noticed the blade quivering a touch, upset by his struggling. Before he could say anything, the waiting knife dropped.*

"Mr. Andrews!" The lovely face of the brunette stewardess looked down at Jake Andrews, concern evident in her stare. "Are you alright?"

The return to reality from the dream-state jarred him so much, Jake could only shake his head, trying to clear the macabre images from his mind. Without speaking, he raked his fingers through his short red hair, careful not to upset the portable computer on the seat tray before him.

"Is there anything I can get you?" the young flight attendant asked. "Would you like a pillow or for me to dim the lights for you?"

Jake looked around at the collection of red-eye flyers in First Class. His seat was the only one with a light on above it. Everyone else had the sense to grab what shut-eye they could before landing in LAX.

After a heavy sigh, Jake smiled at the young woman and shook his head. The "near sleep" foggiess refused to clear, even as she chattered in a half-whisper about calling her if he needed anything.

With a smile and nod, he dismissed her and turned his attention back to the computer. The frightening image of the bleeding clown face stared out at him from the glossy screen, frozen in a gruesome rictus of a smile.

Feeling about overwhelmed by the myriad of potential crises that came from working with the most notorious shock rock'n roller in the business, Jake closed the video player. As an afterthought, he clicked through a couple of directories until his personal email account sprouted on the screen. From the main messages list, he located the digital letter that had arrived in his inbox prior to takeoff. After a moment's hesitation, he opened the missive, even though he'd already memorized the short letter. Beneath the letterhead for his former college and his home address, it read:

Dear Mr. Andrews,

Our administrative staff has recently undergone a complete overhaul. In conjunction with the shift of personnel, we have revisited all student disciplinary actions taken over the last eight calendar years. Yours was among those that we reviewed. After further consideration, as well as evidence presented to us after the disciplinary court, it is our pleasure to rescind your expulsion and return you to 'Good' standing here at the school.

We hope that you will accept our sincerest apologies for any inconvenience this may have caused to you and look forward to you attending our esteemed university.

Jake couldn't help but *hrumph* his disdain at the audacity of the letter's tone. Just a few short years ago, he would have jumped for joy at the possibility of having his school record wiped clean... especially since he really was innocent of all accusations. But so much had happened since then, it almost made being kicked out of college seem trite. For a time, the deaths of friends and loved ones had washed the panorama of his memory with a stark reality. Yet now, less than three years later, he found himself reaching for the reigns of a special effects extravaganza, uncomfortably reminiscent of Nightmare Manor itself.

Rubbing his forehead, Jake stared at the frozen video image and wondered again if he was jumping at shadows, or if his gut was right and once again he was about to get in way over his head.

Trying to reconcile Chaz Black's "demon rocker" image in conjunction with the performer's proposed "Terror-copia Haunted Theme Park", with the news from the college, compounded with the late night flight, would only lead to another screaming headache.

In an effort to avoid the pulsing throb that seemed inevitable, Jake cleared the image screen of all its program windows. From within the computer's desktop image, piercing blue eyes peered at him from beneath a lock of sun-yellow hair. The little boy was smiling and reaching out for the camera, as he almost always did whenever Jake took a picture of his two-year-old step-son. Nathaniel Andrews, or "Natey" for short, was always glad to see his father, often greeting him with his endearing smile and sometimes a heart-warming laugh. With the echo of the boy's giggle soothing his jangled nerves, Jake finally slipped into restful oblivion.

## Chapter 1

### **Collingloria Military Academy**

Softly, almost as a caress, the young woman wiped her classmate's blood from the silver carving blade onto her left pant leg; the crimson liquid joined and congealed with the rest of his cooling blood.

A choking, retching sound drew her gaze to the dying teen's eyes. The last telltale signs of terrified astonishment still glimmered there, surrendered to momentary panic, then dull lifelessness. His well-muscled body sagged against the ropes that bound him upright to the backside of the old tree.

"We have to hurry! We won't be able to stay much longer!" her companion hissed from where they gathered on the distant end of the academy's exercise yard.

Warm blood filled the silver goblet the killer held up to the boy's severed neck. As the crimson pool reached the goblet's rim and threatened to spill over onto her pale, milky skin, she pulled it away and handed it to her worried partner.

With the blood packed away in the box a few moments later, along with the rest of their alchemical ingredients, the duo abandoned their freshest kill, retreating into the school's deep afternoon shadows.

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"Sorry if I sound impatient," *Pol* grumbled to the misty apparition of his mentor, Joshua. "It's just that Brenden and I are ready to move, and being told to wait without a reason is very frustrating."

Joshua stood motionless. His white skin looked even paler, given his translucent nature for this mission update. If *Pol* focused carefully, he could not only see right through his mentor, but he could also tell that in reality the man stood about an inch above the floor.

"You need to calm yourself, *Pol*. The last thing you need is for them to get spooked because you acted too soon." Joshua's voice was strong, firm, despite his ethereal nature.

*Pol* jumped up from sitting at the foot of his cot and said, "This is infuriating! We've located the host that Helann is using."

"The rogue, Helann, is not the only person you have to worry about, *Pol*."

"Once we have her in custody, it's only a matter of time before Brenden gets the identity of her partner," *Pol* exclaimed. "It's a

miracle we located Helann at all. I've never seen a female rogue integrate into a host so seamlessly. Without the SoulStar, we could have spent weeks tracking her."

Unwavering, despite the heated discussion, Joshua shook his head. "This debate is moot; until we get clearance from Above, you and Brenden are information gathering only." An edge was creeping into his voice at having to continually bring the SoulChaser back around to following proper protocols. He'd had two other discussions of this type with *Pol* and *Brenden*, and his patience had begun wearing thin.

*Pol* shook his head and walked over to the dorm room window. "Kiah never would have put up with this," he muttered as he stared out into the early afternoon sunlight.

At the mention of *Pol's* old team leader, Joshua shifted his footing and "walked" around to face *Pol's* window. "Kiah wouldn't have been expected to undertake this retrieval for that very reason. His impatience and unpredictability made it a gamble every time he was sent out, and a challenge to keep him from simply running roughshod over even the simplest procedures. You have the skills needed to accomplish the mission, but you need to exercise the patience I know you have."

*Pol* found himself able to agree with his mentor's assessment and slowly turned and leaned back against the window frame. He couldn't quite meet his mentor's eyes, but he was able to relate to the man's opinion. "I guess that it's a good thing you sent me and Brenden on this one, then."

With a satisfied smile, Joshua nodded. "Be patient, as I've said. I get the feeling that you'll be let loose on these rogues soon enough. Meanwhile, remain close to them, so that once you get the go-ahead any collateral damage is minimized."

*Pol* walked across the dorm room, his passing causing not a wisp of movement from Joshua's white, shirt-sleeved robe. Absently, the SoulChaser wondered if his nervous pacing would wear a hole in the room's tight-weave gray carpet. The administrators for the Mahogany Desert Defense facility hadn't cared about much beyond basic comforts and amenities when constructing the Collinglory dorms. 'One of everything' had seemed to be the order of the day: gray carpet, a bed, a built-in desk large enough to allow someone a useable workspace, a free-standing closet and drawer unit done in a faux-wood finish and one window to look out on the bleak, sand-strewn base.

A sudden knock on the door startled *Pol* motionless. Glancing quickly behind him revealed Joshua had already faded away. "Come in," he called, glad that his voice held none of the edginess he felt.

A young man, one of the academy's other Elite students, opened the door and peeked in. "All clear, Draek?" he teased. He may have

worn the host, Tommy, like a finely refined liquid metal, but *Pol* recognized the teasing glint from *Brenden's* ancient gaze.

"What kept you?" *Pol* demanded. He grabbed the jacket to his black school uniform and the two SoulChasers left the nondescript room.

*Brenden* shrugged and replied, "Sorry, running late."

From his retrieval partner's vague reply, *Pol* suspected there was more to the story, but a public hallway was no place to discuss mission objectives. Though his patience wore a bit thin tonight, *Pol* forced a smile and said, "Tonight, twenty-thirty. I need a complete update."

*Brenden* nodded and they walked on in silence, *Pol's* memory slipping into a quiet replay of the conversation with Joshua.

"Head's up. There she is," *Brenden* whispered and elbowed *Pol* in the side. His words brought *Pol* right back to the present. His gaze shifted to the trio of young women waiting at the hallway's glass doors that emptied outside. The afternoon sunlight beyond created a silhouette of the three young ladies. "Great," he muttered. "They're all together again."

"You know what they say about 'trouble coming in threes'," *Brenden* reminded him with a wide smile as the two slowed to a stop before the female trio.

The young woman that *Pol's* host, Draek, had been romantically involved with peered up into his face with intense blue eyes. New to the military school, the rigors of the intense lifestyle didn't show on her face yet. *Pol* found her beautiful. His piercing gaze didn't seem to intimidate her.

"I didn't see you at the gym earlier," Danae mentioned to him, even as *Brenden* and one of the other young women, Claudia, exchanged a touchingly innocent kiss.

The third girl in the trio, Beverly – the one the SoulChasers had determined now hosted the *rogue* soul, *Helann* – shook her head. The escaped soul wore the body as a living disguise, but seemed to be having difficulty mimicking the dead girl's behavior. *Pol* knew little of Beverly; she hadn't talked much – easily the quietest of the three girls. Beneath the blond locks and silver, wire-rimmed glasses, *Pol* found *Helann's* host pretty... in a "girl next door" kind of way.

"Um... Tommy and I were sparring in dojo four," *Pol* replied, barely remembering to use *Brenden's* host's name. Internally, he smacked himself for letting his guard down and almost slipping up.

"That figures, doesn't it, Danae?" *Helann* decided, poking her glasses up further on her nose. The adjustment made her eyes suddenly appear to take up the top half of her face.

*Pol* managed a smile, standing there with his hands in his jacket pockets. Even as he looked from one girl to another, the SoulStar clenched in this right hand thrummed only mildly, indicating the

presence of a *rogue* soul, but giving him little else to work from. He scowled inwardly, wondering why the Devine relic never seemed to respond to him they way they always had for *Kiah*.

The trio of young women led the way as the five students vacated the dorms and headed across the school's open central quad. With a student body of almost two thousand, it didn't take a large turnout to create a scene.

"Have you ever done a female retrieval?" *Brenden* asked, pitching his voice low enough it wouldn't carry and be overheard by the others.

"No," *Pol* replied as discretely. "Kiah and I only ever got assigned the most extreme cases, which hardly ever meant female retrievals. I always thought they had female teams to handle those."

The quintet almost made it halfway across the expansive social venue, before the large group of students gathering excitedly near the Physical Education building drew them into their swelling ranks.

Straining against the flood of bodies moving against her, *Helann* tried hopping a couple times to get a clear view over the heads of her classmates, which seemed to have reversed their movement en mass. "I can't tell what's going on," she called back to the other four in the group, all of whom preferred to linger several steps back from the crowd's main throng.

Before anyone could offer an opinion, the sea of humanity parted to their left and a small group of teachers emerged from the pulse of students, carrying a ramshackle stretcher between them.

*Pol*, *Brenden*, and their girls had a perfect view of the body on the stretcher. It was the mangled corpse of a fellow classmate. The amount of rich crimson drenching the body easily drowned out his pale blue school uniform. Gutted from navel to his throat, at first glance the jagged edges and viciousness of the act suggested an animal attack.

"We think it may be a pit-boar attack," one of the teachers explained as they pushed through the crush of newly arriving students.

*Brenden* ignored the groan of feigned astonishment from *Helann* and managed to block out the more subdued reaction of *Danae*. As *Claudia* turned and pressed her cheek against his shoulder, he automatically put his arm around her. Something about the way the young man's ribs were spread wide open, exposing a hollow torso, as well as the empty, oozing eye sockets struck a chord inside him. "What do you think? Animal attack?" he asked *Pol*, who also seemed distracted by the torn, savaged body.

Shaking his head, *Pol* replied, "Looks more like ritual murder to me."

Nodding, *Brenden* stepped up beside his team leader. "I think we've got the proof we're looking for. How much longer do we have to

wait, before we can make a move?" He didn't even try to mask the anxiousness he felt.

*Pol* turned, catching *Brenden's* attention and nodding for him to follow. "No idea," he replied, leading the five of them into the sprawling school's main hall.

In an attempt to keep the students from panicking and gloss over the tragedy, the academy administration made the students adhere to their regular daily schedules.

An hour later, *Brenden* and *Pol* were walking in silence with their fellow students down the hall of one of the large ancillary buildings used for combat training. Before they reached the exit, the entire building shook from the deafening concussion of a massive explosion going off nearby.

*Brenden* found himself slammed against the wall, *Pol* only managed to keep his footing through luck. Most of the others were tossed around the confined space like scattered chess pieces.

Meeting *Pol's* knowing gaze, *Brenden* stated the obvious, "That can't be good," and the two SoulChasers rushed for the exit as fast as circumstances allowed.

Pushing through the metal door frames, tempered glass crunching beneath their feet, *Pol* and *Brenden* made it outside and surveyed the pandemonium of panicking students that raged across the quad. Off to their left, thick, roiling flames enveloped the main gymnasium. Before either could comment, both SoulChasers ducked as three secondary explosions rattled the gym's lightweight entryway roof, belching thicker black smoke and adding to the orange inferno.

Then, amid the cacophony of chaos and destruction, a bright light suddenly appeared before *Brenden* and *Pol*. A moment later, the image of a man seated in a throne-like chair carved with intricate runes thrust forward from the center of the light. It only took him a heartbeat to become completely visible to the two SoulChasers.

"*Pol*, *Brenden*, the time has come to proceed with your retrieval," said the man, who may have been looking right at them, but it was hard to tell given the dark spectacles that shaded his eyes.

"Understood," *Pol* agreed, even as the Chronologist retreated back into the light, chair and all. Then the light itself paled out.

*Pol* yanked the small auto-pistol from the waistband at the small of his back. "You heard the man," he said, sliding the upper rail back on the pistol to make sure it was loaded. "You check the quad. I'll check ground zero, see if she's there. If you find anyone, radio me on channel 7." He pulled two earpieces he had swiped out of the Communications room from a pocket and handed one to *Brenden*. The other he fit into his right ear, tapping it to activate it.

*Brenden* nodded. "Maybe we'll get lucky and they'll be together."



Without hesitation, *Pol* struck out across the quad, dodging students, teachers and Security alike.

The vast wave of students fleeing from the raging flames engulfing the gymnasium and its adjoining annex building, caused a flood of humanity that *Pol* struggled against. Trying to get as close as he could to the tragic scene, he wasn't sure where he was going or what he may find. Through the crush he pushed, relying on the steady pulse of energy of the SoulStar in his pocket.

When he finally stood before the burning wreckage of the gymnasium, something instinctual urged him to turn and begin circling the smaller structure annex building; a power greater than he now guided him.

The chaos surrounding the burning buildings kept anyone from noticing *Pol* as he ducked and wove his way around to the skeletal remains of tall, metal scaffold stanchions. In his two weeks on this planet, *Pol* had never understood the purpose of the scaffolding; his best guess, the leftovers of some abandoned renovation or expansion to the gymnasium annex. Teetering and swaying now from the heat and damage they had sustained, at the moment they served no other purpose than as a danger to anyone nearby.

He found her there, mostly buried by brick, mortar, and some of the heavy scaffolding.

Blood coated Danae's lips, dribbling down both cheeks to the asphalt ground where she lay. In her hands, she gripped the silver goblet, still encrusted with the blood of their most recent sacrifice.

In astonished silence, *Pol* worked his way through the debris, careful not to dislodge anything that could harm him.

"Draek?" she called out. Her voice gurgled from the blood caught in her throat. This caused a round of coughing that wracked her entire body, spraying crimson streams across her school uniform and red mist into the heat-saturated air.

"I'm here," *Pol* called out to her as he reached her side. Her eyes didn't seem to track properly, scanning the sky, the destroyed building nearby, anything but him. "Danea!" he called out to her. "I'm here!"

Hearing her name, Danae brought her gaze to bear on the SoulChaser and saw him truly for the first time. "You're not Draek, are you?"

Understanding how close to death she was, *Pol* could only shake his head. Inside, he pressed down on the rising despair he felt toward her. His compassion warred with his common sense.

"What's your name?" she choked out.

Meeting her gaze, *Pol* gave her his name.

"SoulChaser?"

A nod from *Pol*...

More coughing ensued and Danae tried to speak at the same time. "Helann said... you'd come for... her. Didn't believe her."

Gauging that Danae's injuries wouldn't allow her to stay lucid much longer, *Pol* gently - yet firmly - guided her chin in his direction so that he could make complete eye contact. "Where is she, Danae?" he asked, hardening his voice to give it a bit of an edge. "I need to find her before she can hurt anyone else."

Danae tried to shake her head, but *Pol* wouldn't let it move. "Didn't want to hurt anyone. She promised..."

"I know what she promised, but she lied. And now you've killed at least one person... probably more." His voice now held no compassion or pity, despite her obvious pain.

A shimmering off to his right, beyond the fallen gridwork, caught *Pol's* attention. From nowhere a beautiful, exotic looking woman walked into existence. Her black hair was pulled back in a severe queue at the nape of her neck; her dusky skin peeked out from beneath a tight, black, shapely body suit and leggings that fit from her waist to her knees, shrouded by a billowing black cloak. Cradled in her left arm rested a six-foot-long wood staff, engraved with intricate runes, each connected by stylized carved ivy. The engravings on the staff pulsed with an orange and red luminescence, as if the staff burned inside with a flame even hotter than the one destroying the buildings behind him. But it was the object that adorned the top of the woman's stave that caught his attention. A curved silver blade, gleaming as if with a life of its own, left no question in *Pol's* mind about the woman's Calling.

"Madam Reaper," *Pol* greeted the beautiful woman.

With a slightly tilted nod, the Reaper replied, "*SoulChaser*. I didn't expect you to still be here." Her voice seemed to echo in his mind as much as in his ears.

"I'm not quite done," *Pol* explained, suddenly feeling like a little boy caught playing outside before finishing his chores.

Taking a slightly higher tone, like crystal chimes in a light breeze, the Reaper said, "Get what you need, then be gone. There are many here that require my attention, thanks to the SoulStar in your pocket."

A flicker in his peripheral vision drew *Pol's* attention. A second exotic woman stood there - shapely, with skin like fresh cream and hair more brilliant than the sun on the horizon. One Reaper didn't worry *Pol*, but two - possibly more - couldn't be ignored.

*Pol* returned his attention to Danae, who seemed captivated by the presence of the woman with the scythe. "I see you," she managed to gurgle. Her wheezing breath now sounded like she breathed through water.

"Danae, I need to know where Helann went," *Pol* demanded as firmly as he dared.

Her eyes fluttered for a moment, then Danae turned her gaze to him. "I never could deny you anything," she whispered and despite himself, *Pol* blushed. The intimacies that Danae and *Draek* shared had nothing to do with him, and yet he felt his own secrets exposed by her simple declaration. "She took the girl out to the graveyard," the young woman replied. With a flop of her right arm above her head, she managed to point in the direction of the military facility's mechanical junkyard.

Despite the terrible atrocities he was sure Danae had participated in since being spiritually seduced by *Helann*, *Pol* couldn't help himself... he leaned down and kissed Danae softly on the forehead.

Standing, he turned to the Reaper. "She's all yours," he said, then made his way out of the cramped space.

Without looking at *Pol* as he passed, the Reaper agreed, this time with a voice hard as granite, "Yes, she is."

The unforgiving tone in the Reaper's voice almost caused *Pol* to shiver as he struck out across the browning grass field between the school and the "graveyard".

In his time here he hadn't taken the time to find out what the administration officially called the many, many acres of discarded military equipment left out to rust away into oblivion. He and *Brenden* had searched the graveyard once, as part of their area recon in the early phase of this retrieval, but he found his own memories lacking and the host's lingering memories woefully inadequate. All he could do now was let the SoulStar be his guide as he navigated through the stacks of old communication equipment, scrapped automobiles, and hulking shells of abandoned aircraft. It didn't take long before he felt hopefully lost, yet he persevered, the SoulStar urging him forward. The path he traveled took him further and further from the military academy and deeper into the winding maze.

The long shadows began playing tricks with his vision and he nearly balked at a turn that his mind told him would only end in a dead end; but denying the guidance of the powerful relic was something he couldn't do, so he followed its prompting and turned to his right. He came to an immediate halt when he realized that the turn had brought him to the open clearing at the graveyard's heart.

There, looking as if she had waited all day just for him, stood *Helann*, holding onto the right wrist of a young girl. The *rogue's* casual demeanor set *Pol* on edge.

Still, he hesitated.

Since *Helann* held the girl's arm in one hand and concealed her other arm behind her back, *Pol* could only guess what she held there. He was certain that had it been only the two of them, it wouldn't have mattered. He could've charged in, taken whatever damage she had

planned for him and inflicted enough of his own to force the *rogue* soul out of the poor young lady, Beverly's, body.

The presence of the young red-headed girl complicated things for him. As if to aggravate the situation, *Helann* called out sweetly, "How does it feel to be standing before a General of the next Eternity War, SoulChaser?"

Caught off-guard, *Pol* replied, "What do you mean?"

"You don't know, yet?" *Helann* took great pleasure in this revelation. "The Eternals think this is merely a flare up of *rogue* activity. What they don't know is that this is only for starters." She shook the girl's arm, jostling her around like a rag doll. "Don't tell me this little girl is going to keep you from doing your duty, SoulChaser."

Before he could respond, *Pol* sensed motion beside him, immediately confirmed by a soothing, deeply resonating voice that said, "Worry not, SoulChaser. We are here. Jean Archer is under our protection."

Without looking, *Pol* nodded his acknowledgment to the spectral Guardian, who then placed a gentle hand on the SoulChaser's shoulder. For a brief moment, *Pol* glimpsed the mortal realm through the angel's sight. Before him, haloed by near-white light, twelve persons stood, ringed around little Jean Archer.

"What's wrong?" *Helann* demanded now, breaking into *Pol*'s reverie.

Throwing caution to the wind, *Pol* grunted in response, dropped Danae's knife into his palm from where he'd concealed it in his right sleeve, and dove forward.

Anticipating the move, *Helann* tried to drag Jean out from behind her, intending to use the child as a shield, but to her immediate astonishment, the girl couldn't be budged.

Two swift steps later, Danae's knife was loosed from *Pol*'s hand and much to *Helann*'s astonishment it hissed forward and fully embedded itself in her left shoulder with a *thump!*

Without a word, Jean took advantage of *Helann*'s injury to wriggle free of the *rogue*'s grip and scamper on all fours into one of the many makeshift tunnels of huge machine parts that catacombed the graveyard.

The impact of *Pol* slamming into *Helann* threw her to the ground with a grunt, dislodging the small object she'd held concealed behind her back. It bounced and rolled several feet away; *Pol* only recognized it peripherally as a "biologicals only" grenade.

*Pol* rolled *Helann* onto her back and straddled her abdomen, one knee on each side of her.

"Enjoy your little victory, SoulChaser," *Helann* spat at him. "It's a hollow one. This won't even pause the tide that is coming."

Pausing despite his training, *Pol* said, "What do you mean, slag?"

But Helann just began to laugh, a cackle that looked surreal coming from the gentle face of the "girl next door".

The rogue still laughed, blood spilling openly from the knife wound.

Filing her words away for later consideration – and hoping that Helann had set the grenade's timer with enough seconds for little Jean to make an escape – Pol withdrew the SoulStar and placed it against Helann's chest, one of each of the relic's four pronged feet touching its corresponding point of upper and lower sternum and the inside edge of each breast.

Helann gasped as the SoulStar's clear center stone began to swirl a luminescent green.

In the sky above, strange multi-hued lightning flashed and coalesced in the cloudless blue.

With a final shudder, Helann's host's eyes bulged for a moment, then went dim and lifeless.

A satisfied nod and grab for the SoulStar were the last things Pol managed before a yellow flash beside him caused the world to erupt with heat and a moment of intense pain.

When Brenden burst onto the scene several seconds later at a full run, the smoke and heat had already dissipated, revealing the original clearing in the center of the equipment graveyard, not a living thing in sight.

## Chapter 2

The driver's door to the black Corvette Stingray closed with a satisfying "thunk" and Jake Andrews turned his attention from the sleek sports car to the cream and tan Mediterranean-style mansion before him. The faceted brick drive beneath his feet circled a beautiful, landscaped fountain. Beyond the clear, sparkling water waited a large set of doors finished in dark mahogany; a single European column flanked each side of the entry. Above the doors, a half-circle window arched toward the sculpted porch roof, accentuating the height of the front colonnade.

Glancing at the rest of the massive home, Jake raked his fingers through his short, auburn hair. He could only wonder, "Am I in the right place?"

He knew his own home was deceptively sedate, considering the roller-coaster his life had been over the last few years. *Maybe, he thought, Chaz Black prefers to retreat to someplace peaceful, after the wild showmanship he exercises on stage.*

He could hear the soles of his imported Italian leather boots click against the flagstones as he glanced at one of the open garage bays, exposing the unmistakable front end of a classic 1960s Corvette, and approached the front doors. Before he reached them, they swept open.

Not sure what to expect, Jake didn't recognize the man that greeted him with a welcoming smile. His voice was deep and resonant as he said, "I see you found the house alright."

Only then did Jake realize that the shock rocker Chaz Black, the biggest name in the theatrical rock'n roll industry, stood before him, his hand outstretched.

Unable to mask all of his astonishment, Jake grasped the older man's hand, saying, "Sorry, you caught me off-guard, Chaz."

Chaz laughed, a rumbling that echoed up from deep in his chest. "I get that a lot," he said with a warm smile, then noticed the car in the drive. "Nice ride. Rental?" he asked and held the broad door open wide.

With a nod, Jake entered the mansion; greeted by a coolness to the air that muted the warm California heat.

"Man after my own heart," Chaz noted, closing up the house. He motioned to a set of open French doors several steps to their left. "Please."

Still reeling from the difference between what he imagined the shock rocker's home would look like and the quiet, almost serene foyer, Jake nodded and followed Chaz into an ornate sitting room.

"Not what you expected, I take it?" Chaz asked, settling himself into a plush, red velvet reading chair.

Shaking his head, Jake sat down on the near end of a matching red sofa. "Somehow, I pictured something more... more... darker?" he tried to explain.

Summoned by some unseen means, an attractive blond woman, in a French maid's short black-and-white uniform, with black stockings over pearl-white skin, walked into the room. She carried a silver tray, complete with a white China tea service in her hands.

Jake tried to not gawk at the woman's abundant cleavage as she bent before them, setting the tea service out for the two men. He did catch Chaz admiring the view of her from the back, and even as she stood up and glanced at him, he met her gaze without embarrassment.

"Do you require anything else?" Her voice had a sweet timbre that sounded almost musical.

"I think that's all, Daphne," Chaz replied and the maid bobbed a quick, shallow curtsy and walked from the room. When his gaze returned from watching her leave to the teacup in his hands, Chaz noticed Jake watching him with a bit of a smirk on his face. "More of what you expected?" he asked, raising the cup to his lips.

Jake chuckled and drank, too.

#

After the initial pleasantries had come and gone, Chaz Black lead Jake Andrews through the mansion's wide halls, down into the estate's basement, which housed the shock rocker's "Studio of the Macabre".

Gazing at the full-size statue of a naughty teenage schoolgirl on a torture rack that could have dated back to the Middle Ages, Jake couldn't help but reflect back to the kaleidoscope of different effects and sets that he, Ron Hall, and Trent Massey had fabricated for Nightmare Manor a few years back. The vampires in the ballroom, a ghost bride sleeping levitated above her lost love, the dot and door mazes, the zombie crypt... it had all seemed like harmless, scarey fun... until that night when it all became way too real. Not wanting to fall into a state of melancholy as the memories threatened to wash over him, the effects producer swept his view from left to right, taking in the large collection of pain and torment all at once.

"The reason I invited you here was to try and win you over to my cause," Chaz called from the center of the room, where he stood beside a large conference table, on which a collage of assorted photographs awaited their perusal.

Sauntering over to the table, Jake replied, "I will admit, the opportunity to meet with you away from the craziness of a concert venue appealed to me. My attorneys weren't that happy about me coming here unchaperoned—" to which Chaz laughed aloud, "—but I

assured them you wouldn't talk me into investing in anything that was high risk."

Shaking his head, Chaz held his hands out to the pictures before them. "Behold, my dream realized."

At that, Jake looked down, paying more attention to the photographs. Scanning them, he suddenly reached down and snatched one up. The full-color image was that of a high-energy amusement park ride named The Unhappy Sumo. Holding the photo out, he said, "This is over at The Landmark Resort. I remember when this ride was brand new. Its got four banks of seats that rotate and spin on a central axis, about thirty feet in the air. It made me sick the first time I rode it, but after I was used to it, I couldn't get enough." He dropped the photo, then spied another and pointed. "That's the Starship. One tower launches you over three hundred feet up at high velocity, the other pillar takes you to the top and drops you into freefall. Killer rides, both."

Chaz nodded and pointed first to The Unhappy Sumo, then to the Starship. "That's now The Guillotine, and the other's Heaven and Hell."

As he looked, Jake recognized many of the other rides from the defunct amusement park outside his hometown of Shadow Valley. Pondering the significance of Chaz's words, he finally looked up into the rocker's intense eyes. "You're talking about more than a simple seasonal haunted attraction. This is a full-on horror park. I don't know if my family name is gonna have enough sway with the planning commission to get you approval for this. Money to reopen and operate The Landmark, sure, but this...?" He waved at the table and shook his head, but already his mind had started running different scenarios that he could try to win the votes he and Chaz would need to make the man's dream a reality.

"You're the only son of the town's founding family. My people tell me that if anyone can push this project through, it's you. We're talking about a heavy influx of cash into the local economy, not only from purchases, but think of the jobs we'll be creating: contractors, laborers, foremen, park employees, performers... this could be a good thing in a lot of ways."

Jake rubbed his chin, losing himself in thought. "I know the towns in the area could really use the influx of cash, that's for sure. And there's been a lot of talk about either selling or demolishing The Landmark." Again, he met Chaz's intensity, look-for-look. "Recent talk, in fact. The longer the park goes abandoned, the less likely an investor is gonna come along and dump loads of cash into it to bring it back to its heyday."

Gesturing to his chest, Chaz said, "I've got the cash. Plenty of it. Enough to do it right. All I need is for you to sell it to the powers-that-be. Allay their fears, soothe their concerns, help



them to look past what happens on stage and understand that what I want to do will benefit everyone... especially them."

Jake wasn't foolish enough to buy Chaz Black's "Wholesome Benefactor" routine, but he also recognized a good business opportunity when presented with one. "There's a lot of things that could go wrong."

"More things that could go right," Chaz countered with a nod.

"The planning commission's gonna hate the 'horror park' idea," Jake said, even as he felt his own resistance to the idea fading. "Especially with all that happened at Nightmare Manor." At that moment, Jake Andrews found himself in an unusual situation. Not so much that he *couldn't* find plenty of arguments against the plan, but that he didn't *want* to argue.

Making his way around the near end of the conference table, Chaz suggested, "You brought them around once."

Jake looked up at the man who towered over him by several inches. The rocker's black locks cascaded over his shoulders and down his back. His tan face held a little afternoon stubble, but it was his eyes that held Jake's attention.

"You can bring them around again." Then he held out his hand in expectation.

"There are a million little details to work out before we can even really get started. And with the Centennial celebration coming up, everyone's maxed out as it is."

"Come on, Jakob. Make this old rocker's dream come true." Jake could only describe Chaz's look as feverish and for a brief moment, a chill of fear ran down his spine. Then the internal resolution set in and he shook Chaz Black's hand.

"Let's do it."

Chaz smiled in triumph.

### Chapter 3

#### **Paradise: The Afterlife**

Joshua Robinsson, SoulChaser Mentor and Afterlife connoisseur, crossed the foyer of his high-rise apartment to the front door. He expected to see Kiah when he opened it, but instead found Pol standing on his Welcome mat, a pensive look on the SoulChaser's face.

"I don't usually meet with my teams at my home, but please come in," Joshua said, holding the door wide.

Pol nodded his thanks and stepped inside. Never having been to Joshua's home in Paradise, his Mentor watched as he looked around.

Joshua lived alone and preferred it that way. He had long ago forgotten how many different versions of Paradise he had sampled. From a sprawling plantation mansion to a small cottage on the edge of a vast icesea, he always tended to gravitate back to the big city. And he wasn't alone. Billions of others shared his love for the bustle and energy of the big city.

Pol wandered through the suite, admiring the collection of memorabilia that Joshua had acquired from his tour through Paradise. He stopped at a head-high spear tipped with a hammered spearhead about a foot long. Then he glanced at Joshua and said, "You've been to the Chandalia mountains?"

Smiling, Joshua said, "Lived there for a while. Loved the solitude, but as you can see, the city called me back." He held his arms wide, as if to encompass everything around him.

Pol nodded. "Funny thing, not many people I know of consider living in a high-rise apartment any kind of Paradise."

Joshua gestured for Pol to follow him over to a large bay window. He threw the curtains wide, affording them a beautiful panoramic view of the city. The sun sat low on the horizon, tinting the vast pallet of colors from the buildings with a hint of shadow. A clear blue sky above already let a few twinkling stars through. Below them, the city streets were alive with people going about their evening business.

"I noticed when I came that even though the street was packed with people, there wasn't the tension you feel on a regular city street," Pol said as he absorbed the view.

Smiling, Joshua took Pol by the arm and, ignoring the SoulChaser's initial protests, lead the man down the elevator and out to the curb.

Standing in the crisp evening air, he opened his arms wide, gesturing to everything around them and said, "Look around. Tell me what you see."

His voice tinged with uncertainty, Pol said, "Uhh... lots of tall buildings, people walking everywhere. Trees lining the street."

Joshua inhaled a deep breath and let it out again. "Breathe in that air."

Pol did so, then looked puzzled. "It smells clean and rejuvenating. Nothing like I would have expected. I didn't notice it before now."

"Did you notice that there's no lock on my front door. Just like there's no doorman at the building entrance?"

Pol turned to look behind them. The large glass entry into the main floor lobby had people coming and going, but no security to monitor them as they did so.

"Come on," Joshua said and set off up the street. His denim pants and white shirt rippled in the light breeze and his simple sandals slapped lightly on the sidewalk.

Pol hurried to catch up with his Mentor and they walked side-by-side, Joshua keeping up a banter while pointing out the many beautiful things around them.

"It all comes down to this," Joshua said as they crossed the street and walked through the entrance to a massive city park, "we have all the energy and opportunities and creature comforts of the big city without any of the downsides. No pollution, no crime, no homeless. This is the Paradisicle version of a huge metropolis."

Letting his eyes take in the sights of the park in the evening light, Pol said, "I never would have expected... I think the last time I visited your home, you still had that beachside bungalow. But this is good, too. I think I see the appeal."

"Now," Joshua said with a smile, "What brings you to my little piece of Heaven?"

As they talked, the two men walked over to a bench beside the park's walk path.

"It's about something that happened on my last retrieval," Pol said.

Joshua shifted his weight a little to get comfortable before he said, "I was at your debrief. Nothing stood out."

"I was so concentrated on getting the details right, it completely slipped my mind."

Joshua nodded and said, "That can happen the first couple times. What was it you forgot?"

Pol leaned forward, nodding a hello to the two young women walking past them, resting his elbows on his knees. "Right before I captured Helann, she told me that... I'm not even sure if it's important now."

"Go on. She told you what?" Joshua prodded gently.

"Well, she said that I was standing before a General of the next Eternity War."

A heavy moment passed between them.

Stunned into silence, Joshua crossed his arms, one hand rubbing his chin in thought.

Pol gave him more than a minute of silence, before saying, "What do you think?"

"I'm recalling something Masaal said as he was being lead away from the Judgement Counsel. It didn't seem important at the time, either, but I'm beginning to think maybe there's more to it than any of us know."

"Well, that's the only thing she said that I forgot in my debrief. Sounds like you already know more than I do," Pol said, sounding relieved.

Joshua looked at the SoulChaser and put a brotherly hand on his shoulder. "Thanks for bringing this to me. Now, I'm famished. Join me for dinner? I make a mean spicy fish."

This time Pol smiled in return. "No, thanks. Can I have a raincheck?"

"Certainly," Joshua said as his guest stood.

"I'll see you at our next mission briefing, then," Pol said, and began to walk away.

"Pol," Joshua called, causing to the SoulChaser to stop and turn. "If you remember anything else, or need to talk, you know where to find me."

Pol looked around them, then back at his Mentor. "Until you get bored, that is?" he said, a teasing tone in his voice.

This brought a broad smile to Joshua's face. "Being that as it may, you can always find me."

Nodding, Pol agreed, then turned and joined the crowd of evening walkers heading deeper into the park.

Joshua watched until he couldn't see Pol any longer, then, satisfied the man had crossed over into another area of Paradise, probably the mountain cabin he shared with his wife, Collette, Joshua turned and pondered this new information as he began the walk back to his own home.

Chapter 4

"Light 'em up!"

It must have felt the way a fighter pilot did moments before streaking down and off the end of the flight deck. His vision closed into a tunnel... nothing existed to the left and right... just the tarmac ahead. At the far end, black, gray and purple clouds plumed and coalesced, threatening a storm on the Southern California horizon. The evening sun behind struggled to break through and light the way before him.

"We're all a Go on this end, Nick," came the voice of his crew chief, Bucky, in his ears. "It's dialed in as closely as we can get it without real-world numbers."

"I'm ready to light 'em up," Nick James said, his voice sounding hollow to himself inside his race helmet.

"Nick..." Bucky began, then hesitated for a few seconds, "listen, you can't drive it like you would on the street. If you do, it's going to bite you, hard. Are you sure you don't want to wait until tomorrow?"

Nick cleared his mind of everything but the sound of the engine, the feel of the racing wheel in his hands, the feeling of being at the launching end of a shotgun barrel.

"Start the countdown, Bucky," he said.

A heartbeat later, the light tree in his peripheral vision began to blink. Two flashes of red at the top, then three amber, then a bright green.

Nick butterflied the clutch and buried the accelerator. He sensed the high-octane fuel flush through the intakes, felt the seat below him drop a touch as the rear driveline loaded up, then his head snapped back as the Cobra street racer leapt off the line. First gear... slotted into second... the tone of the RPMs told him to go for third... His vision tunneled in even closer as the far end of the several-mile-long dragstrip seemed to slither closer.

As he tried to contain his focus and not let the laser-speed indicator board on the shoulder of the drag strip distract him, he let his eyes catch a slight glimpse of the far horizon. At that moment, a spiderweb of lightning flashed through the far storm clouds—

The blackened clouds above lit up again in a rainbow of sheet lightning... less than a moment later, thunder crashed through his head, threatening to deafen him... the site of a macabre, gothic room... a handful of bodies scattered around, blood covering them, life drained from their eyes... a beat up, crazed young man, crashing through several panes of clear glass...

"—Nick!" shattered his reverie, the horizon ahead beginning to swerve before him.

His heart surging into his throat, Nick fought to keep the rocketing car under control. It sluiced right, then lurched to the left. The wheel struggled to leap from his hands, but he kept it from escaping.

With a shuddering, weaving, the Cobra screeched to a halt, sprawled on the shoulder of the drag strip.

"Nick! Nick!" Bucky's voice screeched in his ears. "Stay put, we're on our way!"

The powerful engine growled into silence and without responding to his crew chief, Nick yanked his helmet off and gasped in a full lungful of air. Without meaning to, his gaze found its way back to the sight of the storm on the horizon and the haunting memories of Nightmare Manor creating a deep foreboding in his heart.

## Chapter 5

### **Paradise, the Afterlife**

In the midst of a dreamless sleep, Kiah felt the warm kiss of the morning sunrise on his dark skin. The backs of his arms tingled with it and as he rolled over, the golden brightness of it was like a halo behind his eyelids. Slowly, he awoke; his eyes gradually opened and adjusted to the dawn's rays. He expected, as his vision came into focus, to see the radiant golden hair of his beloved laying beside him. Instead he stared into the much-too-close face of a large feline. Tan and brown, streaked with black from his pink nose, back over his head, the adorable face wasn't actually a lion, but the biggest house cat Kiah had ever seen. And the man had the distinct impression that the cat was amused with him.

"Good morning, Collan," Kiah grumbled, his mood not quite as euphoric as it had been a moment before.

*I've been up for hours, already,* the feline informed his friend. *The missus has been, too.*

Kiah chuckled and slowly sat up and swung his legs around to the side of the bed. "I doubt that. You never get up early," he teased the companion from his youth.

Collan refrained from comment, instead stretching and then walking over and butting the back of his head up against Kiah's ribs. As he reached back and scratched the creature's neck, he again reflected on the unusual nature of communication here. It wasn't that he could actually hear the animal speak, nor was it anything like telepathy, he simply understood the impressions the cat was feeling. It was the same with Mike, the brutish German Shepard that helped Collan and his feline sister Caisha run the household. As the dog bounded into the room, Kiah new he was in for it.

*We've all been awake for hours!* Mike told him. *How can you possibly sleep in on a day like today? Come on, get up! You've got things to do.*

"What would Kenah do without you two to keep me in line?" Kiah asked as he reached out to scratch the Shepard's head.

With what Kiah could only describe as a disdainful expression, Mike retreated back a step, out of reach of Kiah's fingers, and looked down his muzzle at the man. *Are you getting up?* he demanded.

"Yes, yes, I'm getting up!" Kiah exclaimed, his exasperation with his companions beginning to rise.

*Alright then,* Mike agreed and stepped forward to accept his morning scratch. Kiah knew that it was all an act with Mike. Nothing could have really kept the canine from his morning ritual, regardless of what his answer to the dog's question had been. Mike

would have come up with a glib response and accepted the scratching anyway.

After a minute of canine and feline purring, the patriarch of the home felt ready to embrace the day. Even in life, he had never been a morning person, a fact that Kenah had teased and complained about nearly their entire married life. Even on an important day like today, he still found it difficult to rise and face the morning. Greet it, yes, but actually getting up was always an ordeal.

Across the room, Kiah found his toothbrush and paste. As he brushed away his morning breath, he mused about the parallels between mortality and the Afterlife. During his own mortality, there had been days – sometimes more in a row than he wanted to recall – that circumstances had kept him from brushing his teeth, along with everything else related to good hygiene. Now, here in Paradise, he and Kenah enjoyed all of the comforts that they'd so often been denied in their mortal lives, whether they needed to or not; as a result, he still insisted on the unnecessary morning rituals.

After a quick shower, the superfluous donning of deodorant and that cologne that Kenah liked so much, Kiah dressed in comfortable pale blue pants and a loose white shirt that closed with a clip at the side, and headed out to face the family.

He found the golden tresses he'd expected to see on the pillows beside him, in the massive kitchen, attached to the rest of Kenah's beautiful person. A couple inches shorter than her husband, she seemed a touch irritated as she scrubbed at a pan in one of the three kitchen sinks.

"Good morning," Kiah called as he crossed into the room, heading straight for her.

Putting down the pan, Kenah turned her blue eyes to him and smiled. She radiated beauty whenever he looked at her and he felt his breath catch in his lungs as he approached. "The boys told me you were up... finally," she said with enough of an edge to her voice that he couldn't tell if she was sarcastic or genuinely mad at him.

"Thanks, guys," Kiah called out to the room without taking his eyes off of Kenah's creamy white face. He didn't have to look around to know that Collan and Mike were there, somewhere, smug in the knowledge that Kiah would get his due.

The couple's embrace and morning kiss wasn't long enough as far as Kiah was concerned; when they parted, he glanced down at the large pan she was scrubbing and said offhand, "I don't know why you insist on cleaning this place yourself. We have attendants that will do that for you."

Kenah patted him on the back as he turned to walk around the island counter. "I know, but it keeps me humble," she replied, returning to her labors.

Kiah stopped in the middle of the large gathering room, which was attached to the south end of the spacious kitchen. "I know, but



it's their Calling," he replied. It was an old argument, one which neither of them really had the heart to get into today.

As Kenah finished with her cleaning and rinsed the pan, she asked, "Speaking of Callings, I don't know how you can sleep in with all that's about to happen."

"It's a gift," Kiah called absently as he walked over to the wall of windows on the south side of the gathering room. Beyond the panes of glass, their estate stretched out as far as he could see. Far to the east, west, and north grew the heavy woods that bordered three sides of the estate. To the south, shimmering with a life of its own in the morning sunlight, waited the sea. He had longed for a place like this all of his life. Now that he had it, he considered it nothing short of a miracle.

"I'm glad to see that you're up; our guests will be arriving before long," Kenah called to him as she handed the dirty hand towel to an elderly attendant named Marie. Marie smiled at the mistress of the household and immediately turned and left the room through a side hall.

Gazing out over the estate, Kiah took a moment for a contented sigh, just as Kenah walked up behind him and put her arms around his waist. "Now that we have everything we could want, why do I still feel too inexperienced to be a parent?" he asked softly.

Laying her cheek on his strong back, Kenah replied, "I think that's simply the nature of raising children. You'll do fine. You wait... they'll grow big and strong, just like their father."

Turning in her embrace, Kiah turned his loving gaze down to her and added, "But smart and beautiful, like their mother."

Kenah's lips turned up in a smile and her eyes twinkled in the bright light coming in through the windows. "Of course. That's a given."

Maria, a small bundle wrapped in white linens carried carefully in her arms, approached Kenah from behind. Kiah's shift in attention told her of the woman's approach.

The recently promoted Guardian Angel watched as his wife turned and accepted the infant into her arms, cooing to the newborn and speaking softly to Maria as she did so. It seemed so picturesque to Kiah, seeing the two women coddling his daughter, the firstborn of their family. Suddenly, he felt large and gangly as he tried to picture himself in the scene.

A touch of pressure on his calf preceded Collan's teasing comment, *I think I'm ready to go out and face the day.*

Looking down, Kenah teased back, "Chase the grasshoppers, you mean."

With an air of innocence, Collan met her gaze and replied, *Once they learn that it's my yard, we'll get along fine.*

Chuckling, Kiah opened the glass door beside him and the foursome stepped outside. A moment later, as the door was beginning

to swing closed, Mike bounded outside, nearly bowling Kiah over, and raced across the stone patio and down the steps to the rear courtyard.

About a dozen family members and friends congregated on the patio, typically in the midst of at least three separate discussions.

Glancing over the stone rail, Kiah noticed even more guests lounging in the gardens below. "Looks like we have a full entourage today," he commented.

"What did you expect. It's not every day that a couple has their firstborn, even in Paradise," Kenah teased him lightly as the attention of everyone came to focus on her and the bundle in her arms.

For a moment, Kiah stood back as the family and friends approached to congratulate Kenah and see little Talethah. She had her father's cocoa-colored skin and dusty hair. Her newborn soul peered out through her mother's brilliant blue eyes as she charmed everyone around her.

Kiah was astounded by the number of family and friends that had gathered to see the baby for the first time. He knew it was an important day, but he couldn't help noticing that the crowd around Kenah and the baby was decidedly female. Both sets of parents were there and most of their siblings, as well. Relatives that had long passed before Kiah was alive, had rekindled relationships with him upon his arrival in Paradise. The only ones missing, such as Kenah's only brother, Levahn, were those that hadn't earned the level of Glory which allowed them to visit here. All in attendance had either earned the same Glory as Kenah and Kiah, allowing them to come and visit as often as they wanted, or were of a higher Glory, granting them the right to visit any of the lesser Kingdoms.

Kiah couldn't help noticing how many "lesser spirits", such as Mike and Collan, roamed the vast estate. It seemed as if everyone present had brought their own entourage of animals and playmates. All who knew Kenah and Kiah well were very familiar with the couple's fascination for animals. Their shared existence in Paradise was a colorful menagerie of animal scents and shapes, where the lamb and the lion quite literally rested together under a nearby grape arbor, seeking respite from the early afternoon sun.

"As you know," Kenah's mother, Melanie, was saying, when his wife gently nudged Kiah in the side, "you're brother couldn't be here, but he sends his best."

Distracted now by Kiah's evident distraction, Kenah automatically asked, "How's Levahn doing?"

Melaine stood nearly as tall as Kiah and had developed the habit of sharing statements and comments with him, even when she was talking to her daughter; Kenah's sea-blue eyes continued to look up to her mother's kind face, even here in Paradise.

"He's much the same, which is to say, neither good, nor bad," Melaine replied and took a sip from the crystal goblet she held. "He is so brilliant, and yet he doesn't seem to aspire to better himself, or his immortal existence. When your father and I visit him, he seems driven to show us that his estate is exactly as he wants it and that he can't conceive of ever needing anything else."

"Doesn't he ever want to be reunited with Amberleigh and have a family?" Kenah asked.

Melaine sighed heavily and her gaze turned soft. "For someone as brilliant as he is, I don't think he understands the complexity of an Eternity spent in solitude. Amberleigh visits him frequently, but she knows that spending too much time with him will eventually hold back her own development and progression."

"Smart girl," Kiah commented, accepting his baby daughter, along with a quelling glance from Kenah.

"Indeed," Melaine agreed with a nod. "He's not fooling anyone, but I think he does have occasional times of joy. He certainly perks up whenever you two visit. And I'm sure he'd love to see little Talethah."

Quickly, Kenah responded, "We plan to take her to see him shortly."

This response caused Melaine's gaze to narrow a bit. Before he found himself refereeing an intense Mother/Daughter debate, Kiah handed Talethah off to Melaine, then kissed his wife on the cheek and said, "I see someone I need to speak with."

The baby did the job of diffusing the moment and two generations of females began to discuss mommy/daughter things even as Kiah retreated from the small circle and headed straight for the man he had noticed standing quietly near the trees that bordered the main lawn.

"I'm glad to see you, Joshua." Kiah greeted his former Mentor with a firm, friendly handshake.

"I wouldn't have missed out on such a special day," Joshua replied and nodded his head toward Kenah. "She certainly has taken to little Talethah."

Kiah's gaze followed Joshua's to where his wife and newborn continued to attract a gradually swelling crowd of family and friends. "It comes as no surprise to me. I've always known she'd make a good mother," he said, a smile in his voice.

Shooting a sly glance to Kiah, Joshua muttered loud enough to be heard by his former protégé, "I'm guessing that you make a pretty good father."

Kiah's response surprised him. Shaking his head, Kiah remarked, "I'm not so sure." He met Joshua's steady gaze, following up with, "I don't even know how to hold her. As stupid as it sounds, every time I hold her, I feel like if I'm not extra careful that somehow I'll break her." Joshua opened his mouth to protest, but Kiah

forestalled the reply with, "I know. She can't be hurt, won't ever have to go through disease or experience pain... but that doesn't make it any easier."

Joshua gave Kiah a brotherly pat on the shoulder. "Sounds like you need to spend more time with her... get to know her and learn for yourself that she's gonna be okay. That's what this Leave-of-Absence is for, you know."

"How are Pol and the others doing?" Kiah didn't bother keeping the mix of concern and longing out of his voice.

Joshua's eyes clouded a bit as he pondered the best way to answer the question. "The team is doing well. Pol has really stepped up to take your place. He doesn't have the raw talent that you did for getting into tough jams...." Kiah chuckled to himself. "...but I don't have to spend as much time explaining his actions to the Council, as I did when you were still chasing *rogues*."

Kiah chuckled at his former Mentor's easy heckling. "I still managed to get even the most difficult jobs done."

Nodding, Joshua agreed. "Which is why you're supposed to be taking this opportunity to enjoy the time with Kenah and little Talethah. Fulfilling your duties as a Guardian won't be as easy as you may think it will be."

"At least it won't be retrieving souls."

"I thought you enjoyed your Call."

Kiah nodded. "I did - *do*, but I saw so much death, I began to worry it would affect me, change me into something I couldn't stand. Make it impossible to be a father, for example."

"I doubt there's any chance of that," Joshua replied. His expression turned serious and he said, "I hate to bring up work on such a special day--"

"Feel free," Kiah prompted.

"When you were out on retrievals, dealing with all those rogue souls, did you ever hear anything about an uprising within the Realm?"

"A revolution within the Realm of Lost Souls, or them revolting against the rest of the cosmos?" Kiah asked.

"Less of the former, more of the latter," Joshua said. "On Pol's last retrieval, he took down a particularly nasty rogue named Helann. I wouldn't be surprised if she's clawed her way up the food chain in the Realm. Before Pol sent her back, she said something about a coming Eternity War. Does that sound familiar to you?"

The surprise was evident on Kiah's face. "Another Eternity War? The last one nearly destroyed Eden. What could the Soul Lost hope to gain taking on the Eternals?"

Joshua said, "That's what I'm wondering, too. And why I thought I'd ask you."

Kiah shrugged. "We always hear things like, 'I'll get you back', 'you'll regret the day you came after me', that kind of thing."

The idea of the Realm raising a revolutionary army has a ring of familiarity, but I honestly couldn't tell you why. Let me think on it. If I come up with anything new, I'll let you know."

Joshua nodded and the men shook hands. "Excellent. I couldn't ask for more." He then noticed Kenah's attention on them. "Looks like you're needed, my friend."

Kiah caught Kenah's wave for them to join her. "Coming?" he asked as he began walking away.

Joshua graciously declined, adding, "I'm content to watch. You go on. This is an important time. You don't need an old Mentor around, cluttering things up."

Knowing better than to argue, Kiah shook Joshua's hand again and with a supportive smile, turned and crossed the wide lawn to where the crowd of family and friends waited. Kenah stood in the middle, Talethah in her arms.

Kiah arrived and Joshua watched as his friend accepted the baby into his own arms, then bowed his head over her, paused for a moment, then pronounced a heartfelt blessing upon the infant.

Joshua about burst with pride, knowing how hard Kenah and Kiah had worked to receive the opportunity to raise a family, here in Paradise.

## Chapter 6

### **Shadow Valley, USA**

Ron Hall's rich, brown eyes stared at the decapitated head with unwavering intensity. His gaze took in everything from the expression of agony to the crimson blood splatters all along the surface of the metal shop table and the savaged neck... stains which matched the thick crimson all over his hands, stretching up to his elbows.

The room lay swathed in darkness, all light focusing into the single bright halo shining down onto the metal table. From somewhere beyond the encroaching shadows floated the eerily melodic strains of *Midnight Syndicate*, adding a macabre soundtrack to the scene.

With confidence born of long practice, Ron retrieved a Polaroid instant print camera from a nearby wooden workbench, almost knocking a blood-bathed meat cleaver onto the shadow-soaked concrete floor. Without blinking, he slowly placed the camera to his eye and snapped off two shots in quick succession. A decisive yank pulled the developing photos out of the camera's ejection slot and he returned it to the wooden workbench, thumping the camera down, then switching on an overhead florescent light.

The harsh light illuminated the cork board fastened to the workbench's backplate. The two new pictures joined a gruesome montage of over thirty garish images pinned to the board. Placing both hands flat on the workbench, Ron leaned closer to inspect the new photographs. They helped to create a nightmarish collection of death and dismemberment that would make any serial killer proud. Pursing his lips, the effects designer looked from the two photos to the decapitated head in it's yellow pool of light, then back to the stilled images.

The workshop door crashed open, startling Ron out of his thoughts.

"Dude, you gotta see this," the newcomer called and a moment later the whole room lit up as Jake Andrews flipped on the main lights. His four-year-old Golden Lab, Sunshine, padded along right behind him.

Blinking against the harsh change in atmosphere, Ron glared at his business partner – and best friend – and growled, "Little warning next time, please."

Jake waved off Ron's rebuke, crossing to the large room's stereo to shut off the creepy Halloween music. "Remote?" he asked, absently scratching Sunny's muzzle.

With a patient sigh, Ron retrieved the remote control from the top of a nearby file cabinet and tossed it to Jake.

Snatching the remote from the air, Jake faced the large plasma screen on the far wall and switched it on.

The harsh light reflecting off of the workshop's dull white walls finished ruining Ron's concentration. Shaking his head, he walked over to the shop sink and ran his hands under the cool water, cleaning the stage blood from his arms. Pink water pooled and swirled down the stainless-steel drain.

"I finished the second half of the Mangler display," Ron announced, turning his attention back to the television. As he dried his hands on a pink-streaked terrycloth towel, he noticed a silent news report playing out on the screen. Silent, that is, until Jake cranked up the volume.

"--asked the neighbors if they'd seen anyone suspicious in the area. We were told that the only indication they had that anything was wrong, Harvey, was the loud sound of an engine racing away from the park," the off-camera newscaster explained. The camera panned across the late evening view of one of Shadow Valley's more frequented teen hangouts, Andrews' Field.

"What's going on?" Ron asked, approaching the television, his eyes glued to the park that Jake's family had donated to the city many years before.

Jake shushed him and said over the studio reporter, "Just watch."

"--witnesses see what kind of car it was, Michael?"

The report cut back to the brushed and polished newscaster on the scene and the man replied, "At this time, Harvey and Janet, we've only talked to one person that says they saw the car as it was speeding away. The young man describes it as..." he paused and referred to the PDA display in his hand, "'an old yellow four-door that his grandpa would drive, but really loud and fast.'"

"Sounds like something maybe my own father would have owned," Janet interjected.

Harvey agreed.

"Michael, do the investigating officers have anything to go on?" she continued.

The newscast went to a voice-over shot of an area of the park, closed off with yellow "POLICE LINE - DO NOT CROSS" police tape.

"Unfortunately, Janet, details are sparse at this early stage."

The camera panned across the forms of three bodies, covered with white, blood-stained sheets.

"We're told that two of the victims have been identified as eighteen year olds Marsha Stevens and her boyfriend Chad Phelps."

At this, Jake paused the DVR's playback and turned attention to Ron. "Recognize the names?"

Ron shook his head.

"They both worked for Nightmare Manor," Jake explained, his voice thick with implied meaning.

"Are you sure?"

Nodding, Jake resumed the news report playback, then advanced it quickly forward.

Reaching for the remote, Ron protested, "Wait. The report's not over."

Jake's expression turned to a scowl as he carefully watched the silent, jerky movements on the screen. For a moment, they reminded him of the absurd motion of old silent films. "They only talk about them working at the Manor and speculate if the two events might be tied together... typical small town sensationalism. Here's the part I wanted you to see..."

When Jake resumed normal playback, it focused on the image of a local police officer in his dark blue uniform, wearing tan latex gloves. "--we found near the bodies. It appears to be one-half of a wedding announcement." The camera zoomed in on the torn half of a color mailer, with a very familiar woman's face on it. "At this time, we haven't identified the woman in the picture, but we expect to shortly. We also encourage anyone with any information about her--". The image paused, again, but this time on the close-up of the beautiful blond woman, presumably facing her intended, but now staring at a jagged vertical tear.

Stunned at the revelation, Ron only gaped at the frozen image. "That's Taya!" he exclaimed in a whisper.

That's when he noticed something in Jake's hand that he hadn't seen before. He accepted the proffered item: a torn half of the couple's wedding announcement, this time of Jake, love in his eyes as he smiled at... nothing.

Closing his left eye, Ron held the photo up in his left hand, placing it in his field of view, beside the frozen image on the screen. Even though they didn't line up with exactness, due to the angle of the shot, they matched up enough to convince the effects man they were a set. "Where'd this come from?"

More movement beside him drew Ron's attention back to his best friend, who now held up an Express mailing envelope. "It showed up this morning. No return address." From the somber tone in Jake's voice, Ron knew this disturbed his friend as much as it did him.

A chill that had nothing to do with the Northwest Coast autumn temperature sent a shiver of fear from the soles of his feet to the top of Ron's head.

"The way I see it, you really only have one option," Ron decided. He turned and walked back to his workbench. After a quick visual spot-check, he turned off his work light, then turned back to his friend.

Jake stood there, the TV off, waiting. "Let's go," he agreed, not quite so patient as Sunny.

"I'll drive."



Forcing a grin, Jake slapped Ron on the back as they vacated the studio.

"Sunny," Jake called the dog and her ears perked up at the sound of her name, "Go play."

Like a child set loose to play on a favorite playground, Sunny barked once, then charged off onto the estate grounds.

"Can you drop me off at Sirius Sound on the way? The Raptor's done," Jake asked as they hurried down the walkway of paver stones to the multi-car garage.

Ron took out his keys, leading Jake to the bright red Tesla roadster in the driveway. He had left the top down when he arrived this morning, but the sun hadn't been up long enough to make the leather seats uncomfortable.

"I think we should probably talk to the cops first, then decide what else to do later," Ron replied, climbing in behind the wheel.

"Fair enough," Jake agreed, settling in beside him. "When was the last time you juiced this thing up?"

Ron shook his head. He knew that Jake didn't take the all-electric car seriously, but he was determined to one day change his friend's mind.

"Last night."

"'Cuz the last thing I want is to have to get out and push," Jake continued to heckle.

Ron tapped the large "D" on the center console and flattened the accelerator pedal. The red two-seater leaped forward like a scalded cat, bringing a smile to its owner's lips.

"Think the killings will have any effect on the Centennial?" Ron asked.

Jake shook his head. "Hope not," he replied. "Lots of people have sunk lots of cash into it."

"What if this turns out to be a replay of Nightmare Manor? Can we afford to take that risk?"

Scowling, Jake said, "I don't know, but it's not in our hands. If the county heads decide to cancel the Centennial, I guess we'll burn that bridge when we come to it."

As they approached the local Police precinct office, Jake's banter dried up and he grew silent. With a wordless grumble that sounded more like a grunt, he pulled himself out of the low-slung sports car. With envelope in hand, and joined by his best friend, the duo headed into the station, out of the blazing sun.

Inside the building's air conditioned walls, it took little effort to attract an intense amount of attention to them. Jake only had to flash the torn photo and mention the news report a couple of times and before he knew it he sat in an interview room, facing a pudgy detective and a massive mirror beyond him. The questioning started out simple enough, clarifications on who he was, why he was there, what the picture was of and how the torn piece came to him.

The envelope and picture disappeared for a few minutes. When it returned, now bagged and tagged with an evidence barcode, Jake sat at a cold metal table. After a few minutes of question topics looping back on each other, the mood of the interview shifted without warning.

"Tell me about," the detective glanced at the folder of notes on the table, "Nightmare Manor."

Jake sighed and began a rehearsed explanation of the events that had transpired on Halloween night three years earlier.

The detective waved him into silence. "That's not what I mean. I've reviewed the file. I know what it says here, and apparently, so do you. What I want to know is how you managed to avoid any responsibility for what happened."

A scowl creased Jake's brow.

"I'm not sure what you mean. Trent and I were both found innocent of any crimes. Doesn't it say that in your file, there?" he demanded.

The detective closed the manila folder and then entwined his fingers together and rested his hands on it.

"How does this have anything to do with me getting a torn up wedding invitation in the mail?" Jake couldn't be sure, but it seemed like the pale blue walls were closing in. The light above the table felt sharper, painful on the eyes. He could feel his face begin to flush with heat, despite the cool air pumping in.

A smile that held no humor trickled onto the detective's face.

"Exactly what I was wondering."

Before more could be said, the digital lock for the interview room door beeped.

The detective straightened in astonishment as three men entered the room.

"Jakob Andrews, don't say another word."

Jake about fell over from a mix of astonishment and relief.

Nicholas James, leading his ever-present shadow, Alexander, and another man Jake didn't recognize, halted beside the metal table, all attention on the detective.

The detective had to lean back to avoid being lorded over by the newcomers.

"What's going on here? You can't come in here!"

"My name is Nicholas James. I Chair the *SIN* organization. The man to my left is my personal assistant, Mr. Alexander and to my right is one of our corporate attorneys, Mr. Jackson. He's here on behalf of Mr. Andrews."

Behind the trio, two more detectives entered the room. Jake recognized them as Detectives Taylor and Mendez, the two men who tried in vain to cut short the terror which had unfolded at Nightmare Manor.

"Sorry, Vance. Your interview is over. He's 'lawyered up'," the short, burly Detective Mendez growled from the back of the crowd. The arrival of four men that he had familiarity with went a long way to easing Jake's anxiety.

"Nick!" he exclaimed, "when did you get to town?"

Nick nodded to Jake and said, "Come on, let's go."

With a smug grin at Detective Vance, Jake stood and followed his three rescuers out of the interview room.

Nick refused to talk until they had successfully wound their way through the halls to the lobby of the precinct building.

"Jake!" Ron exclaimed and stood up from one of the rooms many padded benches. "I thought they'd decided to lock you up."

Taking a cleansing breath, Jake replied, "Not funny."

Ron's teasing grin never wavered, but Jake sensed a tension behind his friend's eyes.

"I need you two to meet me back at my office," Nick told them.

Ron glanced at Nick as the five of them headed for the exit. "You still keeping that office open? I thought you'd closed up shop out here," he said.

They emerged into the glaring sun and Nick put on a pair of black Ray-Ban sunglasses. "The office is closed up, but we kept the lease open on it. The dust bunnies have been breeding madly, but once we get them all evicted and have the online services restarted, it'll be like we never left."

"Cool," said Ron.

"Ron and I are gonna stop off at Sirius Sound to pick up my truck, then we'll meet over there," Jake said and followed Ron over to the roadster.

With a wave, Nick agreed, "Don't take too long. We've got a lot to discuss." Then he, Alexander and Mr. Jackson walked over and climbed into a bright yellow stretched Hummer H1. A few moments later, the rig pulled out of the parking lot and crawled up the street.

From behind the wheel, Ron said, "So, Nick James is back."

Jake nodded and climbed in beside Ron.

"I guess so."