

# Souls Triumphant

By

Scott William Foley

# **SOULS TRIMPHANT**

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## Note From the Author

This novel has been a long time coming. I wrote it (for the first time) five years ago, after graduating from Illinois State University.

I did this after I visited some poor career counselor months before my commencement from college and told her I wasn't sure I was meant to be a teacher. She asked me if I could do anything in the world, what would it be. I told her I'd love to write a novel I'd been thinking about.

She was a glutton for punishment. She asked me to tell her about the book.

Thirty minutes later, she was imploring me to write my novel. She said I had the rest of my life to work; I must get that book written! I think technically she could have been fired for her advice, but I'll always be indebted to her for encouraging me to take a chance.

So, my parents, being the generous souls they are, allowed me to move into their basement.

I substitute taught during the day, I wrote at night. If I didn't sub during the day, I wrote all day and night. I wrote and I wrote and I wrote. I lost contact with almost everyone I knew. I got fat. I wrote. For at least eight hours a day, I wrote, no matter what. I wrote. I got fatter. Believe it or not, it was one of the happiest periods of my life.

Finally, around June of 2000, the book was done. Or so I thought. Like all masterpieces of literature, it'd taken me six months to write. I was convinced I'd be published in a month or two, receive a contract from a major publisher soon after that, and then I'd spend the rest of my life doing what I loved most—I'd write.

So, it's now 2005. I've been a teacher for five years.

And finally, the book has been published.

Of course, this is a dream come true for me. I'd be remiss if I failed to mention some instrumental people in my life and in the life of *Souls Triumphant*.

First, my parents, Ross and Connie. They spent a large amount of money on my college education only to hear me tell them I wanted to move into their basement and write a novel. More shocking, they *let* me do it! If that's not love, I don't know what is. They've always allowed me to dream and stood by me whether I won or lost. I love them both and pray I'll be half as good a parent one day as they were to me.

Second, my wonderful wife, Kristen. She's been my fiercest editor and my greatest cheerleader. She's put up with more than her fair share of my insanity and never *once* threatened to kill me! I can't imagine being without her, and I can't wait to spend the rest of our lives together! I love you, Krissy!

Third, my friend, Layne Moore. In the midst of interviewing for a new job, she took the time to edit a book that ate up a great deal of her valuable time. I'll always be thankful to her for being a good friend and a thoughtful editor.

Fourth, to all those people who humored me over the years as they read my drafts or listened to my rants, who asked me questions, who offered ideas,

and who were simply my friends. I'm sure you've all pondered my sanity over the years, and I'm sure you still do!

Finally, to you, the reader. Without you, this dream would have died long ago. I appreciate the spending of your hard earned money on my books, and I hope I never fail to entertain you.

Well, here we go! I've only had a handful of people read this. It's my baby, and I'm finally leaving it alone with strangers! I hope you like reading it as much as I loved writing it.

Scott William Foley

June 1, 2005

## Prelude

Atop the lone mountain, the warrior stood.

Below him, the war raged.

He stole a quick glance to the Creator's great sculpture, the silver moon, his constant companion. Then he extracted his sword. The air hissed in complaint before the blade ignited, engulfed within sacred flames. He spread his enormous wings and leapt from the solitary peak. For the briefest of moments, his golden body and great white wings were silhouetted against the luminous orb hanging in the night sky. Then he plummeted.

He landed in the midst of the Burnt Ones. The other Celestial Knights, already engaged in battle, were relieved to see their comrade. The Burnt Ones were enraged, however, and some felt even a twinge of fear. The newest Knight developed a habit of making their ranks pay for conspiring against the Creator.

All stood still, gawking at the Knight. He stared down the Burnt Ones. His fellow Knights took their place at his side. The Burnt Ones fell in next to each other, their charred wings forever smoldering, their talons always razor sharp.

A massacre loomed.

Before the war resumed, the Knight glanced past the Burnt Ones, past their leader, the Fallen One, to the figure standing behind him. There she stood—the Spetatrix. Without looking at him, the Knight saw a glimmer of a concerned smile form upon her face. He did not have time to return her favor; the Burnt Ones charged.

The Knight calculated the warriors' odds against the banished monsters. Three Celestial Knights against ten Burnt Ones. He knew the outcome. He had no fear, however. He felt only peace and courage. His brothers were being defeated when he arrived. They would be defeated yet. So be it. The Kingdom would never fall, even if its Knights should.

The Knights charged.

Insidious shadows sprawled across the desert sands as the Knights' flaming swords danced wildly amongst the exiled fiends. They formed a circle, standing back to back, holding the Burnt Ones at bay. They slashed at the Knights with their stained talons, but the Knights parlayed with their swords. The stalemate could not last forever.

And it didn't.

The Burnt One called Eblis dove into the Knights' circle headfirst. His seared forehead was sliced open, but his talons still tore through the neck of a warrior. The wounded warrior fell, the flames suspending the hovering disc above his head extinguished, and he joined the Creator. The circle was broken.

The fresh Knight took flight and kicked Eblis across the newly administered laceration. Eblis dropped, dazed. Shaitan, another Burnt One, leapt into the air and caught the Knight in a bear hug, compressing his pure wings, forcing him to descend. The Knight landed and did a somersault, shucking Shaitan off to the side. The Knight stood straight and swung his enflamed blade in a wide arc. He decapitated two Burnt Ones with one move.

All stood motionless.

The Knight raised his blade high into the air and invited the rest of the Burnt Ones to take their chances.

“He is superb,” the Fallen One spoke in a forgotten tongue. “I do not know how I missed him when gathering my army.”

The Fallen One looked at his Spetatrix. She paid no attention to the ferocious fray before her. As was her duty, she simply watched the Fallen One. Even though she appeared tranquil, the Fallen One could nearly taste her inner anxiety.

“His heart is too selfless, unfortunately. He never would have joined us. But *what* a warrior he is! Most admirable, yes?”

Again, the Spetatrix only watched.

“I know you revere him; your secret is safe with me. I won’t tell the Creator. Go ahead, see how he fares.”

She did not look away from her assignment.

“Bah! All of you, so naïve! So pompous with your self-righteousness! You are willing slaves! You must realize that as I did!”

The Fallen One waited. As always, the Spetatrix offered him nothing more than silence.

“Very well,” he seethed. He knew his plan was nearly executed. No matter how virtuous the target, temptation always prevailed.

The Knights’ valiant battle continued. They were separated, and within moments, the weathered Knight fell to the vicious onslaught of Sammael and

Lilith. The fire left him, and his disc fell without making a sound against the loose sand.

The Knight from the mountaintop fought alone now. Alone against eight of the most merciless beings to ever have existed. He would double his efforts.

He beat his wings powerfully, kicking up dust and sand, hoping to blind the traitors. He lunged into their midst, his sword slashing with savage precision.

Like his own, their eyes emitted a flaring energy, except theirs were red.

Locating them within the sandy maelstrom was simple, but he knew that his own bright green eyes gave him away as well. And, unlike them, his disc was still held aloft by the sacred flame; it was also giving away his position. The flame no longer burned from the tops of *their* heads, now only black smoke bellowed instead.

He sprinted through their ranks, swinging purposefully. He sliced through the upper arm of Asmodeas, the thigh of Belial, and the stomach of Ravana. Upon emerging from the gang of beasts, he turned and faced them once more.

Then he fell to his knees.

Azazael had ripped his throat out with his scorched talons. Neon green liquid spouted from the Knight's jugular.

He refused to tend to his throat. Instead, he clutched his flaming sword tightly with both hands and held it high, ready for the monsters' approach.

They hoarded him like locusts.

When finished, the knight fell upon his back with rips and lacerations upon his entire golden body. Green spilled everywhere, coagulating with the sand he was dying upon. He would not release his burning sword.

The Fallen One smirked in self-admiration. He felt something enter his heart, something he believed he would never have again. That something was hope. The mortal prison he had been sentenced to suffer within would soon diminish, and he would rise to that which he knew he was destined to be! *He* would rule the Kingdom!

He turned to his Spetatrix and gave a wily sneer. Still, she refused to look to her fallen Knight. She would not remove her eyes from her obligation.

“He could live!” the Fallen One tempted. “I’ll call off my soldiers if you wish it. All you must do is break your gaze from me, tend to your Knight! He will heal! You know he will! Just a touch of nursing is all he needs! Save him!”

He waited for her to commit the transgression, but she refused. He must tempt her further! His emancipation depended upon her faithlessness!

“Just *look* at him, and I will call them off!”

She did not comply.

The Fallen One ordered his troops, “Lift him to his knees.”

The Burnt Ones kicked his sword away and pulled the Knight up by his wings until he sat wobbly upon his knees. His eyes still burned bright even though his body was covered in his life’s essence. His time was fleeting.

The Knight made not a sound as he struggled against the fourteen talon-tipped hands holding him firmly in place. He knew he had no hope of emerging

victorious, but the fight must never be relinquished. He strained against them, but he would not look at them. Nor would he look to his Spetatrix. He wished not to torture her more than the Fallen One already had. Instead, with his sword out of reach, he lifted his eyes heavenwards and looked upon his silver talisman, the moon.

“Extinguish the greatest of the Kingdom’s Knights! Send a message to our Creator—his reign is ended!” the Fallen One commanded.

Sammael stood before the Knight. He spread his scorched, featherless wings wide behind him in a display of power. He raised his right hand and its fearsome talons high into the air, poised to decapitate the mighty Knight.

Uninterested, the Knight continued his silent communication with his luminous friend.

“You’re out of time, watcher!” the Fallen One growled at the Spetatrix. “If you’re going to save him, you must act now!”

The Spetatrix remained resolute. As her duty dictated, she kept vigilance over the human, the Fallen One.

“Do it,” the Fallen One whispered. His plan had failed. He was trapped forever in the flesh.

Sammael’s talons screamed in descent through the air, heading directly for the already mutilated throat.

In mid-plummet, the ground shook after a thunderous eruption exploded overhead. The Burnt Ones fell, knocked off balance by the shockwaves of the

detonation. The Fallen One also lay prostrate, but he quickly turned over and glared at the Spetatrix.

Her observation of him did not break.

“Finish it!” he bellowed.

Sammael burst to his withered feet and swung his talons toward the still-upright Knight. Just as his talons pierced what was left of the Knight’s throat for the final time, a split ravaged across the sky’s horizon and blinding light streamed out. The split grew wide until all below were submerged within its inexplicable radiance.

The Knight simply stared at the moon above.

## Chapter 1

“Wake up, Joe. Your time in limbo is over.”

Joe lifted his head from Yeats. A long strand of saliva stretched from the cover to his chin.

“Charming.”

Joe opened his eyes in confusion and unconsciously wiped the drool from his face. Before him, across the round wooden table, he saw Mojo.

“Mojo? What are you doing here?”

“Disturbing your fascinating reading, apparently . . .”

Joe chuckled. His eyes cleared and the fuzziness evaporated from his head, allowing him to take in the sight of his surreal friend, Mojo. As always, Mojo sported dark sunglasses that hid half his face. His long, dark, wavy hair hid the other half. He wore a white shirt left unbuttoned to his sternum, revealing a red and white bead necklace. Just a tickle of chest hair peeked from beneath. And although Joe could not see them below the surface of the table, he knew Mojo wore the standard black leather pants, and, as usual, they were at least two sizes too small. Mojo’s ever-present whisky bottle sat upon the table as well, half empty.

“I was just having the weirdest dream,” Joe informed.

“Angels and demons?”

“How’d you know?”

Mojo cocked his head in disbelief.

“Right. Never mind how you knew.” Joe yawned and stretched his arms far above his head. “So, what’s up? Not that I’m not glad to see you, but this is a little out of the ordinary. I mean, here, with all these people.”

Mojo swallowed hard from his whisky bottle. “These people don’t see me,” he mumbled. “That’s what we like about *you*.”

“So you keep telling me,” Joe laughed. He cleaned off the cover of his book.

“That can’t be required reading.”

“No, it’s not,” Joe replied.

“Always the academic.”

“What’s wrong, Mojo? Not a Yeats fan?”

“I didn’t say that,” Mojo quickly responded. He pulled again from the whisky.

Joe realized he had offended his hard-drinking mentor. They sat for several moments in silence, unsure how to commence. Finally, Joe broke the silence.

“I just like his poetry, that’s all.”

“I do too, believe it or not. I don’t blame you for reading him.” Mojo seemed to relax a little, glad their awkward moment passed. “How was the ceremony?”

“Good. You know, as good as it could be, I guess.”

“Did you celebrate afterwards?”

“I went to dinner with Luke and Ruth and their families,” Joe answered.

“That’s cool. You know, being a big day and all that.”

“Yeah, I guess it’s not everyday you graduate from college.”

“Yeah.” Mojo seemed lost in thought. Then, focused once more, he said,  
“What next?”

Joe played with his coffee that had become ice cold while he slept. “What,  
you mean like a job or something?”

Mojo chuckled. “Guys like you and me don’t do ‘jobs.’ That’s funny.”

“Well, I’m not the musician you are. My opportunities are pretty limited.”

“There’s lots of opportunity for poets out in the world.”

Joe’s jaw dropped. “You’re kidding, right?”

“You gotta take chances, Joe. You gotta take chances.”

“I’m not you, Mojo.”

“I know that.”

“I should have gotten my education degree, at least then I could teach.”

Mojo huffed, “Then you’d become part of the problem, not the solution.”

“I disagree.”

“That’s your deal. You know how I feel about the establishment.”

Joe sighed, “Well, then you don’t *really* want to know what I have in mind.”

Mojo dropped his head hard against the wooden table’s surface. Beneath  
a mess of greasy hair, he moaned, “Don’t say it . . .”

“What other options do I have?”

Mojo shot his head up quickly and commanded loudly, “Move to California!  
Live on the rooftops if you have to! Follow your dream of being a writer!”

“That doesn’t work for everybody!” Joe yelled back. Several of the patrons within the coffeehouse looked at him, befuddled. Joe glanced briefly at them and flushed. He grew acutely aware that Dean Martin’s *You’re Nobody ’Till Somebody Loves You* played softly over the speakers.

“We’ve talked about this,” Mojo reminded, amused by Joe’s embarrassment.

“Why do you get to yell and I don’t?” Joe asked bitterly.

“Ask them,” Mojo instructed rhetorically with a shrug of his shoulders.

Joe, disgruntled, griped, “We *have* talked about this before, and honestly, I’m tired of it. Grad school’s the only place I have waiting for me. You know that.”

“Take a chance.”

“Not yet.”

Mojo looked away from Joe in disgust. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a plastic bag full of weed. From his other pocket, he took out a small piece of paper. He dropped some of the weed onto the paper, rolled the paper up tightly, and then lit it.

Joe watched incredulously while Mojo smoked a joint in the middle of his favorite coffeehouse, Illumination.

“Trust me,” Mojo chuckled after exhaling a puff of distinctive smoke, “you’re the only one that cares. That’s what makes you special.”

“I’m not special.”

“Only because you won’t allow yourself to be.”

“Whatever.”

“Spoken like a true pessimist.”

A waitress approached Joe. She gestured toward his cold coffee, then said, “Can I get you a refill?”

Joe looked up to the curly-haired redhead and replied, “Yes, please.”

“Nothing for me, thanks,” Mojo mocked.

Joe shot him a dirty look.

“I’ll be right back,” she told Joe.

“Why do you make fun of them?” Joe asked.

“They’re ignorant.”

“Because they can’t see you?”

“No,” Mojo sang lowly, “because they *won’t* see me. There’s a difference. That’s why I don’t want you to go to grad school. You’ll become another mindless zombie, just like them.”

“I won’t.”

“Now it’s my turn to disagree.” Mojo watched Joe roll his eyes sarcastically. “If you go to grad school, you’re going to get the truth muddled up by *them*. They’ve been telling you how to see the world since you were four years old! It’s amazing it never took with you!” Here, Mojo paused to reflect.

“Well, actually, it’s not all that amazing, but that’s a story for another time.”

“I hate it when you guys say things like that.”

“We know,” Mojo grinned. “Anyway, I’m scared, Joe. You heard me right, I’m scared. I’m scared that grad school will finally close off the fourth dimension to you.”

“Mojo, my lease is up in late August. That’s just months away! I’ve got to have a plan!”

“That’s just what they’ve taught you! Fine then, stay in college! Surround yourself with people who live the good life, people who haven’t a clue how much pain and suffering is in the world! Stay with them, and kill the poet inside you! If that’s what you want, then do it!”

Joe threw his head back, frustrated. “Look, Mojo, this is too much! You wake me out of a dead sleep, smoke a joint in the middle of everyone, and want me to decide what to do with my life right now! Give me a break! When you were my age, did you just pack up and—”

“Yep. I sure did. Treated me pretty well.”

“And that’s why you now sit in a coffee shop, smoking weed, without a soul aware of your existence?”

Agitation spread across Mojo’s face. “Tell me that man’s story,” he ordered, pointing with his free hand over Joe’s shoulder.

Joe muttered under his breath and turned. He saw a man a few feet away eating pasta and reading a paper. He then faced his benefactor again.

“What?”

“Do it. I’m going to prove to you why you mustn’t allow yourself to be blinded like they are. I’m going to teach you a lesson in reality.”

“Tell you his story? What do you want to know about him?”

“I don’t want to know anything about him, Joe. I already know all there is to know about that man. But you don’t. And the rest of these sheep don’t either. Prove me wrong. Show me that you understand reality.”

“Fine.” Joe looked back to the pasta-eating man. After a few seconds, he informed, “Well, judging from his meal, he likes pasta. I know he’s intelligent because he taught a math course I almost flunked my first year. Probably plays the stock market since he’s reading the business section. Clean-cut. Patient looking.” *Just another guy drinking coffee and eating lunch*, he thought to himself.

“No! Not just another guy drinking his coffee and eating his lunch!” Mojo yelled, slamming his fist on the table.

Joe jumped at the unusual outburst.

“You see?” Mojo asked while calming himself by dragging from his joint.

“You see? They’ve already blinded you!”

Joe was dumbfounded.

“Congratulations, Joe. Your education has served you well. You took in all the facts, made excellent deductions, did everything by the book. Just as they’ve taught you to do. Your description of him was based in perfect reality, according to those who have taught you. Look at him!” Mojo instructed. Joe did. “He is the perfect example of what you all want to see. He sits there, appearing just as we all want to see him. The exact opposite of myself, might I add. You all breathe a sigh of relief when you see him, because he *represents* everything you

want to see in a human being. But, I wonder if you ever got a chance to talk to his wife, what would she have to say?"

Joe faced Mojo.

"Ah, I've got your interest, don't I?"

Joe nodded.

"You, and everyone else who look at that man and see the personification of perfect reality . . . are wrong. Would you like to know why you and all the rest are mistaken when it comes to that man?"

"Yes," Joe answered.

Mojo puffed on his joint, chased it with a gulp of whisky, and then said, "You don't look into the soul. Everyone's got a soul, and you can't know a person until you look at theirs. Unfortunately, you're the only person I've met on the tangible planet that can do such a thing. And even you, I'm afraid, seem to be choosing the blinders over the reality."

Joe dropped his eyes. Mojo had made his point.

"Would you like to know the truth? The truth according to all reality, all four dimensions?"

Joe turned around and looked long and hard at the math professor. After several minutes, and many uncomfortable glances from his subject of study, Joe returned his attention to the whisky drinker.

"You look unsettled. That's good. Now I know you get it."

"He's a monster."

“Yes,” Mojo agreed. “When that supposedly respectable man woke up this morning, he took his shower, shaved, and got dressed. Then, he went down to the kitchen to find his placid housewife making, as she always did, an adequate breakfast. Once prepared, she placed his food before him and, as usual, he bent over and meticulously studied his morsels. He looked over his eggs, bacon, and toast as though his wife’s life depended upon their flawlessness. She then prepared her own breakfast, pretending not to notice his inspection. Sadly, the man discovered a minute, nearly imperceptible bit of shell within his scrambled eggs.”

Joe swiveled in his wooden chair to gaze upon the professor anew.

Mojo stretched over the table and whispered into Joe’s ear, “Had he not scrutinized his wife so carefully, he never would have known the shell was there. But he had found it. Do you know what his reality deemed appropriate to rectify her horrendous transgression?”

Joe shook his head, unable to break his gaze from the coffee drinker.

“That man, that man you all see to be perfect in every visible way, got up quietly from his breakfast so as not to alert his wife, walked up behind her, grabbed a handful of graying hair, then shoved her head mercilessly against the cabinets in front of her.”

Joe winced.

“Once she fell to the immaculate floor, half-conscious, you don’t want to know what he did to her. I imagine, however, that *you* can fill in the blanks.”

Mojo met silence.

“She has been picking up the shreds of her dignity on a daily basis since marrying him. No amount of make-up in the world can hide the scars upon her soul.”

Once Mojo’s familiar tale completed, Joe felt his eyes welling. The man now had the visage of a horrifying wretch, like a person Joe knew all too well. The professor sat serenely, read his newspaper, and looked the way everyone wanted him to look. If only people saw the ugliness below his surface. If only Joe had seen it for himself, without the help of Mojo. Joe *should* have seen it himself.

Mojo sat in his own seat once more. Joe faced his friend who always spoke the truth.

They reflected in silence.

Finally, Mojo spoke. “You *could* have seen it, Joe. If you’d wanted to, you could have. You’ve been taught to see the idealistic representation of your immediate perception—not the truth. Truth . . . reality . . . is what is, not what we wish it to be.

“I know,” Mojo continued, “that you can see the truth. We all know you see it. That’s what’s drawn us to you. You often have no trouble deciphering the melody once you hear the lyrics. Most refuse to do this. So, want to take another shot at it?”

“Yes,” Joe answered.

“And do you believe you can see the soul? Do you believe you can see that fourth dimension of people, the part of them they want no one to see?”

Joe hesitated, full of self-doubt.

“We believe in you, Joe. All we ask is that you believe in yourself.”

Joe nodded slowly.

“Ready?”

“I think so.”

Mojo pointed to the counter of Illumination. “The trainee, do you see her?”

Joe saw a young woman, probably around his own age, being trained as a new waitress. His first impulse was to assign her as a sorority chick, probably trying to earn some extra cash for a wild nightlife. He smiled at her attractive face, and she caught him studying her. She smiled in return. He instantly knew she had a good soul, but he also realized he had been utterly wrong about her reality. His face sank, and he gave his attention back to Mojo.

“No one,” he muttered slowly, “is who they appear to be. Remember that.” He drank deeply from his bottle. He then wiped his mouth with his unbuttoned sleeve and urged, “Tell me what you saw.”

He shook his head slowly, amazed at how deceiving appearances could be, and morosely replied, “She’s nothing like what I thought she would be . . .”

“Of course not. That’s my whole point.”

“She has a three-year-old daughter. Because of this, she had to drop out of high school in order to support the baby. The father,” Joe said through clenched teeth, “was much older and dropped out of sight the minute she began showing, just as her father had done to her mother before *she* was born. After her baby was born, her own mother kicked her out of the house.

“This new job she’s taken on,” he said with a sad sigh, “takes up her afternoons. In the mornings she works at a grocery store. At night, she delivers pizza until two in the morning to a bunch of drunks and stoners—er, no offense.”

“None taken.”

“She’s doing this because she loves her baby and will do anything to keep food in its stomach and clothes on its back. Just like a Heller novel, though, she’s stuck. She has to work too many jobs so she can provide for her baby and pay the babysitters. She has to pay the babysitters because she’s never home; she’s always at her jobs.

“Within five years, that twenty-year-old woman will look older than the moon itself. That is her . . . reality.”

Mojo leaned forward in his chair, looked Joe dead in the eyes, and asked, “How do you know?”

Gravely serious, Joe answered, “I looked into her eyes . . . and I saw her soul.”

“Yes,” Mojo replied empathetically, “you did.”

Joe felt beads of sweat form across his forehead as he realized what he had accomplished. Truth be told, it frightened him.

“Mojo, how did I do that? I’ve always been in tune with people and their emotions, but her whole world just opened up to me. I don’t understand, I’ve never done anything like that without you or the others helping me!”

“You’re going to be on your own soon, Joe. I wanted you to prove to yourself that you don’t need us anymore. Your time is coming. You have a soul

that allows you to connect directly with other souls. You are a capable writer and a gifted artist, but you are still raw. You see joy and pain where others do not. These abilities you have, coupled with your artistic nature, could flourish to their full potential. But, if you leave them alone and wade through only the three dimensions, they will wither and die. The choice is yours, but you will have to choose soon. You will have to take a chance if you want to become who you truly are.”

“I don’t get it.”

Mojo chuckled. “You will, Joe. You will. And trust me, it’s not going to happen at grad school.”

Joe doubted much of what Mojo was saying. He never thought he was particularly talented as a writer, and he knew he was nothing more than an average artist. However, that episode regarding the trainee had proven most insightful. Perhaps there was validity behind Mojo’s words.

“Okay, Mojo,” Joe conceded, smiling widely. “Like I said, my lease is up in three months. On that day, I promise you, I’ll pack my things and take on the world. I’m going to see if I’ve really got this potential you’ve been harping on me about.”

Mojo grinned sincerely, nodded at Joe in reserved ecstasy, and then took a gargantuan swig of whisky. He put the bottle down, directly between him and Joe, and balanced the still-smoldering joint on its lip. He then reached into his back pocket, pulled out a small notepad and pen, and wrote feverishly.

Joe knew this signaled the end to their conversation. He was fascinated as Mojo scribbled poems and lyrics madly across the tiny paper.

He removed his eyes from Mojo and placed them upon the now slobber-stained copy of Yeats' verses. He struggled to decipher a particular poem, *The Mother of God*.

## Chapter 2

Alessandra heard the phone ring and her heart jumped at its sound in futile expectation, as it always did.

Then she realized it was assuredly her best friend calling. Several expletives escaped her lips before she shut off the hot water she was so enjoying. She climbed out of the shower, grabbed a towel, and then ran through her apartment at top speed. Apparently, she was one of the few people on the planet who did not have a cordless phone.

“What!” Alessandra yelled.

“Well, that’s a great way to answer the phone!”

“I knew it was you.”

“*That’s* supposed to make it better?”

She took a deep breath and tried to calm herself. “Ezra, I’m sorry, okay? I was in the shower. What’s up?”

Alessandra instantly regretted giving Ezra an open forum. As was her habit, Ezra began a monologue that defied all necessity of breathing. Alessandra knew, as was always the case, it was going to be awhile unless she could cut her dear friend off at some point. In the meantime, she decided to do something useful; she put away the dishes that had finished drying.

Finally, Ezra asked Alessandra a question, giving her an opportunity to escape.

“No, actually, I don’t really have time to talk,” Alessandra informed. “I was on my way to the grocery store.”

Again, Ezra chattered away ceaselessly. Alessandra, finished with the dishes, sat down at her kitchen table, opened a container of nail polish, and painted her fingernails while half-listening to the human wind machine.

Alessandra concentrated deeply while she made two strokes on each nail. Ezra had surpassed all need of oxygen. Alessandra noticed a few seconds of silence and figured she had been asked a question. She scanned her short-term memory and replayed Ezra's last bit of babble.

She remembered and replied, "Yes, I'm still going with you tonight. I'm not going to back out, don't worry so much."

Alessandra was amused as she heard a train of warning issue forth from the safe distance of the telephone.

"I promise, Ezra. I'm in tonight, okay?"

Words spoke nearly faster than the speed of sound.

Given an opportunity to retort, Alessandra agreed, "I know I've left you hanging in the past. Not this time, okay? We've graduated! I've got no homework to do! I'm definitely going tonight!"

Alessandra continued being assaulted by Ezra's warnings. The towel-clad young woman fought against laughing audibly after she imagined the impossibility of Ezra ever making good on her threats.

"Ezra, you couldn't fight your way out of a soap bubble, so I'd ease back on those brave words you're shooting at me." Alessandra paused as she joined Ezra in laughter. "Well, you'd better lay off or you *will* be by yourself tonight!"

Imagine, the beautiful Ezra, sitting at a bar all by herself! What a blow to your image *that* would be!”

Alessandra listened as Ezra prattled on. She finished her last fingernail, then lifted up her heel to the kitchen table. It seemed she'd have enough time to paint every nail she had after all.

“Yes,” she responded, aggravated at Ezra's new line of questioning. “Probably the white blouse with the black tank under it.”

Forced silent by Ezra's ritualistic interruptions, she painted on.

“No,” she finally was allowed to answer. “Just black sandals with my jeans. Should be pretty nice tonight, not a cloud in the sky.”

She finished her last toe and inspected her work. Everything looked great! As she listened to Ezra go on and on, circumnavigating the definition of being redundant, Alessandra stared lovingly at the photograph of her parents on the refrigerator. Suddenly, she felt pressed for time.

“Look, Ezra,” she interrupted, “I've got to get to the grocery store. I'll see you in a few hours, okay?”

Alessandra looked disgusted after Ezra's latest question.

“No, I'm *not* putting on make-up, and I'd appreciate it if you stopped harping on me about it.”

She was forced to listen to Ezra complain in usual long-winded fashion about the dangers of not wearing make-up, the impossibility of meeting any guys without it, the social suicide committed without a touch of blush, and on and on and on she yammered.

“See you at eight-thirty,” Alessandra said abruptly before she hung up the phone. She hated to be so rude, but her threshold for foolishness was quite low.

Making her way back to the bathroom in order to dry her dark hair, she groaned after the phone rang harshly anew. She could tell by the irritating tone of each ring that it was undoubtedly Ezra again. Alessandra stormed back to the kitchen, approached the phone, and then turned off its ringer with extreme prejudice. Finally, a sense of peace washed over her, and she entertained the notion of getting back into the hot shower.

## **Chapter 3**

He stood high on his terrace, looking down upon the humans. Although they served him well, he hated them to his very core. He hated them, and he hated being *one* of them.

He leaned upon his balcony and scrutinized the city sprawled before him. It had just begun to shimmer with artificial light as the sun descended. It was an impressive sight, the spectacle of concrete and glass, but he had seen thousands of cities during his infinite life, and he would see thousands more.

After lethargically studying the great “achievements” of mankind, he turned his back to the city and entered his penthouse. It was located atop his own private skyscraper, though no one knew it belonged directly to him. He had discreetly amassed enough wealth over the centuries to easily qualify himself and his “organization” as the richest of the world. Such matters were ultimately trivial to him, however. That which he desired the most was forever lost to him. Or so he thought.

He closed the gigantic curtains to block out man’s manufactured lights. Instead, he preferred the radiance emitted from the raging inferno within his outlandish fireplace. He stood in front of the great flame, mindless of its searing heat, and gazed lovingly into its heart as it danced gracefully and mercilessly. He loved fire, for, like him, it would not abort its uncompromising purpose until it had devoured anything and everything standing in its way.

As he stared deeply into the blaze, his thoughts drifted to the very thing he had dwelled upon since being imprisoned upon the planet—his freedom. He

thought had no hope of being emancipated for the rest of eternity, but now . . . now, like an ember that burned again, his hope was reinvigorated and raging!

He'd always known somewhere in the depths of his black heart that it was bound to happen sooner or later. The rendezvous was a matter of fact, not just lore. To be honest, though, until he had built his empire to the point of keeping surveillance over all possible locations, he had actually entertained the idea that he had perhaps missed the reunion. His logic dictated, however, that overlooking the reuniting was impossible. Even before he had electronic surveillance, he had field operatives located throughout the world. Point being, such a momentous event could not have gone unnoticed by his forces for long.

It had always been a waiting game, but the waiting game was nearly over.

He left the beauty of his flames, walked across the room with the fire's light washing over his striking face, and took his phone from the armrest of his majestic throne. He threw it open and dialed a number. An underling immediately met him.

"Get in contact with the elite; all of them," he said in a sophisticated voice.

Waiting for all necessary questions to finish, he listened patiently. Finally, he answered, "Yes, it is location five-eighteen, just as my instincts told me. Have them meet me at my mansion there. I don't care where they are at the moment or what they are doing; they must be there by eight-thirty tonight. I will fly by jet within the hour. Tell them if they want their revenge, time is of the essence."

He disconnected and faced the huge mirror hanging across the room from his magnificent throne. He walked to it with his hand outstretched. Soon, he

made contact with its smooth surface, his fingertip met with the mirror's version. With great admiration, he studied the beautiful man before him. The dark hair hung to the bottom of his neck, as fine as the purest silk. None other matched the tan skin and chiseled facial features. The body was perfect in everyway. Perhaps too short by the humans' standards of today, but when he had chosen it, it was monstrous in height and stature. Little had he dreamt the possibility of vitamins and chemical engineering allowing mortals to surpass him in size.

Such trivial matters were of no concern to him. He long ago transcended using brute force to achieve his designs. Now he simply used his endless sums of money and cunning chicanery to accomplish his goals.

He concluded his self-tribute and traveled across the living room until he reached the intercom system. It was expertly hidden within a great mural of Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. The painting spanned the entire length of the wall. The unit was hidden within the "floating hand" that many have studied over the centuries. A passion of his was to blend the old with the new—the antiquated with the state-of-the-art.

He pressed a button, and within seconds his driver asked to be of service.

"Prepare to take me to the airport within fifteen minutes."

The stunning man then next made the long journey to his master suite in order to garb himself in more appropriate attire. After all, on this night, he would meet the manufacturer of his child!

He entered the bedroom, stopped as he always did, and paid homage to his most prized of possessions. He looked up to it, the bronzed snakeskin

attached to an enormous wooden plaque. It hung above his lush bed. A destructive smile spread across his face.

He thought of the night's coming events and whispered, "Finally . . ."

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