

JEAN ARCHER

The Diamond and the Rough

*Their biggest investigation
could also be their last...*

Jason A. Anderson

Free
Preview

CAMELOT IN SHADOW...

From the dark forest that seemed entirely too confining to contain them, two massive, four-legged beasts slowly stalked into the clearing. They didn't look identical, but shared similar characteristics. It was easy to tell they were massive hounds of some kind. Even on four powerful legs, their heads stood taller than Valera. Claws that resembled sharp talons tore at the forest floor; corruption spread out from each step of the hellish creatures. Spines along their backs flared slightly, like hackles on a threatened animal. Foul smelling, frothing yellow saliva dripped from crushing jaws, sizzling as it hit the ground.

Jean recognized them as larger versions of the beast she'd nearly hit on the drive up to Lost Lake.

"Hellhounds? Couldn't think of a more descriptive name for them?"

"Jean, this isn't a game. I'd rather not fight them, if I don't have to!" Valera called without looking back at them. "Jean!"

"Come on!" Jean growled to herself. She bent down again to try and see in the deep darkness. Then she noticed a slight silver glint and grabbed for it. Sighing as her fingers closed on the hard metal edges of her keys, she snagged them and sat up again. "Got em!" she exclaimed, then looked out her window and screamed. The desiccated corpse of a young man wearing clothing several decades old stood beside her door, watching them.

"Hurry!" Chad exclaimed, even as the spectral teenager reached out and put his hand flat against the driver's window. Faint ice crystals formed at the edges of his touch...

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“With an intriguing premise and bloody good action scenes, *SoulChaser* takes us on a paranormal adventure where death hunts among us, even as we don’t realize it...”

- Chris Marie Green

Author of VAMPIRE BABYLON

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The Diamond and the Rough

(*forthcoming)

JEAN ARCHE

Volume One

The Diamond and the Rough

a soul **CHASER** novel

Jason A. Anderson

JC Carter, Editor

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Jean Archer: The Diamond and the Rough

jeanarcher.net

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Special thanks to Nerd Girl.

- Metal Boy

PROLOGUE

“The Puppet Master”

Knoll Mansion loomed dark and foreboding against the gray afternoon sky. The gloomy light hid much of the sprawling structure’s details, effectively masking any observer’s ability to tell where the original manor home ended and the massive add-ons began. The huge building took up the entire top of the hill at the center of the grounds, and without direct sunlight, or lightning from the rains earlier in the day, sat swathed in shadows.

It was Tobias Winkle’s attention to detail that allowed him, the self-proclaimed hobo prophet, to slip onto the Knoll Mansion property. His matted hair snagged against the burrs of the two-foot-hole in the chain link as he pushed his way through, but that didn’t concern him. Chain link and razor-wire still only worked as well as it was maintained, and if a person, or animal, was careful and took the time, they always managed to find a stwo-foot-square hole hidden behind a thicket of brush.

Right now, his gaze and attention were focused exclusively on his goal: the warmth and protection of the huge building on the rise in the middle of the grounds.

He’d had a chance to look around the grounds a little several days ago, locating a couple of historical plaques describing the history of the place. That is, before he had to get away when those two teenage punks snuck in and began looking for a way into the building. He reflected on what he’d learned as he walked. Knoll Mansion, built by wealthy banker Finian McNab in 1941, sat atop a small rise overlooking a vast open field that had once been the

cherished front garden of the magnate's wife Ellen and their children. A panorama of colorful flowerbeds and hedgerows, separated by walk paths, had long ago been ripped out and replaced with simple lawns and pine trees; trees that had long since matured and now broke up the tall field grass with towering greenery.

The original wide cobblestone drive had given way to concrete several years ago...years enough ago that the concrete itself, not maintained in many years, now resembled a patchwork of broken slabs of a graying drive. Despite the disrepair it still lead to the heavy main doors of the mansion.

The rain today had left everything saturated, including Tobias, a point verified as a cold stream of water trickled down the back of his neck, beneath his brown-stained overcoat. His dirty blond hair had matted together and dirty streaks trailed down his cheeks and neck. He kept wiping an arm across his forehead to keep his face clear of the moisture.

He'd only been in Shadow Valley for a couple weeks so he had no idea if the amount of rain the area had been experiencing was considered out-of-the-ordinary, but he definitely found it inconvenient. The rain had finally let up for the moment, coming down less as droplets but more a heavy, cloying mist.

"At least I'll smell better. Cleanliness is next to Godliness, and fifteen miles north of Reading," he joked to himself as he emerged from the thick foliage.

A heavy man, his feet sank almost to the ankles of the Reebok running shoes that were a size too large. Still, he was glad to have them.

"Good thing the stupid gang banger hadn't needed them anymore."

Tobias stepped onto the broken concrete drive. From here it looked like a weird puzzle of pale gray pieces

separated by muddy trails the color of milk chocolate. He was grateful for the torn old sneakers as he trudged along.

It didn't take long for him to reach the cement steps that lead up to the building's closest door.

Knoll Mansion's main house remained intact. Four main floors and an expansive basement, it towered over the covered entry, intended to protect those entering and leaving the huge house from inclement weather. Heavy wood double-doors hung on rusty hinges and the industrial chain and padlock meant that no matter how much he pushed or pulled, those doors weren't going to open.

Invigorated by overcoming the first challenge of rusty chain link, Tobias refused to be deterred by the locked doors. Immediately he stumbled down the steps and headed to his left, toward the rearward side of the plantation style manor home. This time his efforts were rewarded not by a main entry, but by a small door that entered into a partially submerged room.

"Beat it," he muttered to the plump black spider lounging on her web spanning the interior of the doorway. It plopped to the floor and made small wispy sounds as it dragged its well-fed body into the shadows blacker than she was. Long ago Tobias had overcome any aversion to spiders or creepy crawlies in the dark.

Crimson liquid... thick... cooling down... draining away... lifeless...

The sudden unease had Tobias glancing around.

Above, the swirling storm clouds – a heavy and looming gray – cut loose with a torrent so violent it nearly swept horizontal rather than vertical. Thunder crashed and echoed through the expansive canyon valley.

Tobias was so nearly overcome with relief, having found shelter from the valley's propensities for sudden downpours, that his eyes watered and threatened to spill tears down his dirt streaked cheeks.

“Sometimes the good Lord helps those that help themselves. And aren’t I good at helping myself.”

His enthusiasm energized and mood improved, the homeless man, whom no one cared for and had no ties to anyone anywhere, entered the Knoll Mansion itself.

The first thing that caught his eye were the ancient metal shelves full of old food storage. His heartbeat jumped at the site and he hurried over to the dust-covered shelves. Shaking fingers rummaged through the rusty cans and detritus that were once bags of rice and beans. His heartbeat returned to normal with the disappointment and he turned away from the inedible food. He had been sick more than once from eating things that were long past their expiration date. Once, it had almost killed him. It took all of his resolution to carry on his exploration, never looking back and the enticing storage shelves.

Screams of children... torn and slashed... a mother’s cries... pale flesh... lightless eyes...

He shook off the sudden creepy sensation and with reckless anticipation worked his way to the far back wall of the room. Once there, he found what he sought: three spongy wood steps up to an interior door that only took a little bit of push and pull before it opened into the basement pantry of the house.

It didn’t take long for him to find stairs from the lower floor kitchen leading up into the body of the main building.

The murky light from the iron gated windows only let in a little more illumination, but it was still an improvement from the dark basement.

Tobias knew little about the value of cornice work, hardwood floors or the black marble theme used on banisters, the front main staircase and all of the fireplace mantles. The huge establishment had gone through two major additions: once as a short-lived luxury hotel, the second to convert as a sanitarium. None of that mattered

to Tobias, with the exception that he estimated the massive building would take many hours to explore. Even with his limited experiences in Shadow Valley, he guessed the Mansion could easily be the largest building in the vast mountain region.

Streaks across the wall... liquid rainbow all in red... lungs collapsed, compressed... final, gurgling gasps...

One thing he couldn't seem to escape, the overall feeling of creepiness throughout the place. The kind of life he'd lead, he'd "seen a thing or two", and more than a handful of them he never wanted to see again. Now, those experiences came flooding back to him in the form of a giant goat's head painted on the wall in dark brown, curled horns and all. The horned beast wasn't the only image that concerned him. Though not a professor of symbolism, he still considered himself a "man of the world". Here there was an upside-down pentagram, the star's lower points aimed skyward. There, strange wisps and curls that looked like energy being summoned from a large stone into a gaping, grinning mouth. Others depicted violent acts, such as human sacrifice. Most of the designs he saw now held no real meaning for him.

"Probably originally in cow or chicken blood, with my luck," he said, then immediately wished he hadn't.

A few steps on he traced his hand along the rotting cloth paper lining the hallways and smirked at the profanity and dirty poems scrawled on the wall; he kicked at a small pile of torn white linens that looked like they had once been some thing's nest. The toe of his shoe dislodged something shiny and he nuzzled the rubber toe further into the pile. When he snagged something, he pulled out what turned out to be a discarded straight-jacket. Reaching down, he snagged the inside of a buckle with a finger and held it aloft. With the buckle at eye-level, the restraints still touched the floor near his feet. It turned out the jacket made up most

of the pile of fabric.

“Wow, new surprises around every turn.”

Tobias made a point of trying to ignore the sensation of being watched as he made his way through the halls. Windows and floors vibrated from the violence of the storm raging all around the building, shaking the exposed wiring where grand chandeliers and lights for operating theaters once hung, now dangling exposed and bare.

Dragging the restraint behind him, much as a small child might a favorite blanket, Tobias walked into one of the observation rooms that overlooked a large stage. As he took in the sweeping, narrow length of the observation room, and knowing that the Asylum’s mini-theater had been converted into an operating theater, it didn’t surprise him to see the remnants of a surgical table in the room below.

He found the sight of the dilapidated surgical theater one of the more disturbing of all he’d already seen, including the demonic graffiti in the main hall downstairs. His mind’s eye couldn’t resist filling the observation room with spectaclad academics and the room below took on a shiny, newness, complete with a stainless steel surgical table and a familiar man laying on it. He hadn’t ever seen himself from a third-party perspective, except in pictures. Until now. There he lay, his eyes dazed and drugged; the white sheet open at his middle and his abdomen flayed back carefully in a swath of liquid crimson.

The Entity watching... waiting... whispering... haunting... anxious...

Tobias shook his head violently to keep his imagination from filling in any more hideous detail. The observation glass evaporated before him, leaving the dilapidated room below, empty and lifeless as before.

His mood darkened, Tobias dropped the straight-jacket where he stood and left the observation room. He

could feel the building rattling like old bones in a wooden coffin as the storm battered the area. His unease increased with every step he took and by the time he reached the wide staircase still adorning the front foyer, he took the steps two-at-a-time to the main level. As his feet touched the imported Italian marble floor, simultaneous lightning flashes strobed through the foyer.

A shadow seemed to move to his left, only visible in his peripheral vision.

“Here kitty-kitty-kitty,” he grumbled, more to hear his own voice than to attract the attention of any felines that may be nearby.

Tobias squinted against the glare and slid to a stop on the dusty surface when he spotted beyond the security mesh and dirt-encrusted foyer windows what appeared to be massive flying shadows. More lightning didn’t reveal any additional details, so he slowly stepped toward the large front doors. The electric flashes outside continued every few seconds, as did the shadows moving past the safety of the barred and chained entrance.

Steeling himself, Tobias reached out to grasp the ornate door handle. Less than an inch away, a massive arc of power leaped from the handle into Tobias’s hand! The force of the shock knocked him across the foyer; he slid to an abrupt and painful stop against the bottom step of the staircase. His eyes wide, he watched as electricity arced all through the foyer in great streaks and bursts. After several seconds fearing he would be shocked again, the energy dissipated and the empty room grew dark again. Darker now, he noticed, since no light came in through the foyer windows. It seemed like a black shroud had been draped over the outside of the building.

Tobias climbed to shaky feet, cradling his burned hand against his chest. He peered at the foyer windows, leaning forward rather than taking a single step closer to them.

Hungry... hungry... hungry!!! FEED!!!

Not a voice he heard out loud, Tobias felt the threat nonetheless. Swallowing his own fear, he turned and ran down the side hall that he had explored earlier. The graffiti on the walls, that had seemed like nothing more than idle fun or ignorant posturing, now glowed a sickly greenish-yellow color that lit the corridor in a nauseating hue.

The corridor ended at one of the large social rooms in the original Mansion.

All hope fled from Tobias when he saw the darkness outside also shrouded the room's large windows. He couldn't even see the iron grating that secured them from the outside.

That was when he noticed the atmosphere in the room felt heavier, almost oppressive. His normal senses told him nothing had changed, but at a deeper -- some may say *spiritual* -- level, he knew a change had occurred. A *presence* had entered the room.

The Entity hungry... murderous... sadistic... compassionless...

Opposite him was the wide entry to the room, its French doors long ago ripped from their hinges and most likely burned for their warmth in the fireplace off to his right.

In the archway, something shimmered as if the moonlight couldn't quite find it. Tobias had no idea what it was; all he knew was that except for the occasional glimmer, the entryway appeared empty. As fear began creeping up from his feet, tingling its way up his spine and causing the hair on the back of his neck to stand on end, he held his breath and froze. He didn't want anything noticing him, especially if he could hide deep within the room's shadows.

He may as well have saved his efforts.

The not-quite-there shape had already spotted Tobias. It sniffed the air with a huge saber-toothed muzzle. It could taste the tangy stench of unwashed human flesh

before even stepping into the great room.

The Entity eager... cunning... plotting... conniving... hunting... ready...

Now that the human morsel in the corner had seen it, the Hellhound ground its massive, armored jaws. Saliva dripped past the fangs and fell to the wooden floor, causing the surface to smolder and singe.

The Hellhound paused to watch as the small man across the room tried to sink deeper into the corner's shadows. Its hunger growing, the Hellhound shook its head. The spines at its ruff and down its spine fanned out, testing the air for any other creatures nearby.

Several smaller beasts had followed the Hellhound out of the Great Void into Mortality. None of them posed any threat to the Hellhound. Satisfied, the hellish beast took one step, then another. Not even the heavy carpet could mask the creaking of the floorboards. The monster made its way into the room, Tobias its only goal.

Tobias hadn't ever considered himself a coward. No one could see the worst society had to offer without developing a solid set of nerves. But even his tried and tested internal strength didn't prepare him for the horror inside him at the first real sight of the creature stalking across the room, straight for him. Once in the full light of the green graffiti on the walls, every claw, every spine, all sinew and sharp incisors became illuminated.

The pungent stench given off by the hellion proceeded it and Tobias immediately wet himself. Despite the humiliation, his eyes remained glued to the dark shape as it took each fateful step. Deathly sober, his mind brought up and rejected several different possibilities before he finally settled on two. First off, he couldn't be sure what he saw was real; except he felt its realness in his bones. The charred wood in the entry and the carpet torn up by the needle-sharp claws emphasized the point. Second, something

deep inside him would not let him stay there to be monster chow, without even a stick for protection.

Concentrating on the beast, he waited until he felt he had a good grasp of the creature's pace.

With very little space between he and the beast, Tobias spotted his opportunity. He yelled as loud as he could, then darted the direction opposite of the way the creature tossed its head. He hugged the wall and ran as fast as he could toward the freedom of the great room's open entryway. The light from the runes flared a brighter green, which gave everything a surreal, ethereal radiance.

The Hellhound roared, its demon's eyes following the fleeing man. The smaller hellions scattered at its rage.

Just two steps from safety, Tobias collapsed into an agonizing heap as a hellion beast's teeth tore into his right hip and both legs. For reasons beyond his reasoning, the pain came a heartbeat before the Hellhound's incisors tore through his body.

A wave of red heat – then blessed unconsciousness – swept through Tobias Winkle as the Hellhound, along with the other hellions in the Asylum, feasted on their first mortal kill in a long while.

- Part One -

Nerd Girl and Metal Boy

“P.A.S.S.”

Seventeen-year-old Cristoff Rainn slowly stretched his entire body. He stood on the iron railing of an old observation platform trying to access a two-foot-square ventilation shaft directly above him. As he reached, the well-toned muscles in his legs flexed and bulged against his jeans. His gray, casual button-up shirt rode high on his waist exposing about two inches of swim team toned waistline. The rest of him was hidden behind that muted gray, but as his arms stretched and flexed, not a noticeable ounce of fat anywhere on them.

Jean Archer shook her head to clear her thoughts; her wavy red hair whispered against her shoulders as she averted her gaze from him. She focused her attention back on the railing she held solid, so it didn't flex under Toff's weight. Grateful for the dark shadows surrounding the seven of them, she blushed in embarrassment. It was bad enough the rest of the group – including Toff's identical older sisters, Spring, Summer and Autumn – all gossiped about Jean and their younger brother; the last thing she needed was for their tittering to be validated. And if it happened because he fell and got hurt while she was spotting for him, it would be unbearably worse. Absently, she wondered how the oldest of the Rainn quint, Noelle – sadly gone since they were ten – would have thought about her affection for the youngest of the five. The surviving

quads did almost everything together and only a serious stomach flu had kept the two other sisters home tonight.

Steam Lake Steel, dubbed “Scum Lake Steel” by Jean and her friends, had sat dormant for almost twenty years. At its initial closure heightened security patrolled the fifteen-hundred acre facility. Days and months had turned into years of neglect and disrepair. The firm hired to secure the facility had erected a twenty foot fence topped with razor wire and called it “Good.” Ever since, the size of the patrol teams had dwindled down to only a few men at night and a couple during the day.

If Jean had been in charge, she thought she'd have maintained tighter security, given the checkered past of “Scum Lake Steel”. Though Shadow Valley, where the steel mill called home, had more than a normal amount of paranormal activity, the sheer number of deaths, especially those of questionable circumstances, attracted a fair number of “other world” investigators. Jean and her team used the mill for polishing their investigative techniques. They had become adept at discerning between a scratching sound of unidentified origin and that of a racoon or muskrat trying to make a nest. It provided a real-world learning environment for all sorts of paranormal debunking. Strange sounds, phantom images, shaped mists, mysterious touching of skin and pulling of hair...Scum Lake Steel had it all.

“No, it's no good,” Cristoff called down from above in barely more than a whisper.

Jean and Autumn helped Toff safely climb down and get his footing on the rusty metal grating of the observation platform.

His disappointment was evident when he said, “It looks like a bunch of garbage has blown up against the inside of the vent. We'd have to clean it out before we could do anything more.”

“Well, then it can’t be where that shadow disappeared into,” Chad “Toast” Hansen, the group’s resident science geek, decided. He looked to the others to agree.

Jean suspected that was true, though it wouldn’t explain the heavy sensation she had of being watched. At different points during tonight’s investigation exercise she’d felt stalked, observed; but then flooded through by a feeling of peace and sense of protection.

“Boss?” Toff broke into her contemplation.

Casting her gaze skyward, Jean noticed that the high ceiling didn’t connect to the towering walls. She had a perfect view of the deep velvet night, painted with soft white clouds and the bright whiteness of a full moon.

“I really think we got fooled by something from above. A bat, or an owl, or something,” she thought aloud to the team.

“Bats, ick!” Serena said, ducking her head and looking skyward, as if hoping to spot darker shadows moving in the depths of the building.

“Long as we stay out of their way, they’re no big deal,” Toff said, brushing his dusty hands on his jeans.

Nodding her head, Autumn said, “I agree with Rena. Bats suck.”

Smiling the crooked grin he always did when teasing one of his three “identicals”, Toff said, “That’s vampire bats. Regular bats just get pissed off and try and dive bomb whoever made them that way.”

“There are a couple different scientific studies that have been done concerning bats recently,” Chad started to elaborate.

“Toast...not interested,” Toff interrupted him and glanced down at the mill floor a couple stories down. “Right now, I’m thinking we better get off this landing.”

Jean agreed and began ushering everyone back into the adjoining hall.

“Don’t worry, Chad,” Serena said, patting him on the shoulder. “You can tell me about bats later.”

Chad smiled in appreciation and hurried up the hall. He completely missed Serena making eye contact with Jean and shrugging.

There was a potential pairing that Jean didn’t understand in the slightest. They had all grown up together, except for Serena Hepworth, who they’d only known in passing for two years. Rena could have been a cheerleader, or even a teen model, with her delicate features and eyes that always enhanced the smile on her face. Instead, as of three months back she had chosen to hang out with the group their private school, Pine Bow Academy, wouldn’t even acknowledge existed. An integral part of that group was Chad, the Tech Designer and Equipment Manager. Why would Rena be interested in a guy like Toast? she wondered. Only his closest friends called him Toast. Jean knew he secretly didn’t get it, but didn’t say anything about it. She was pretty sure it wasn’t a self esteem issue on Rena’s part. She had so much self confidence it practically oozed out of her. *Maybe she’s just attracted to brainy guys,* she speculated as she walked. *But that wouldn’t explain her going out with Gill Hamsford last year. He captained the football team.* Jean didn’t get it, but still mulled the situation over, because it gave her something to think about besides her own bizarre life.

Thin beams of red light from their colored flashlights illuminated the deep shadow of the hall. Kurt put an arm out to stop them all. As one of only three guys in the group, he had taken upon himself the responsibility of their safety and managed investigation security. He was tall and broad, easily the biggest of the three guys, but he also had good instincts. Though he was completely deaf, his other senses had developed to compensate for his lack of hearing.

Jean flashed her beam in the short, five burst pattern

that said, "*What is it?*"

"Wait," Kurt flashed back, she was pretty sure.

"I'll see what's up," Autumn offered and hurried up to where their point man stood, his sharp gaze delving into the darkness.

"Any ideas?" Toff asked and Jean shook her head.

"I'm guessing he saw something that looked odd. There's lots of natural activity around here, so I doubt it's supernatural," she said.

"True, but it's because of this place's extensive history of supernatural events that we train here."

Without her bidding, the memory came back to her of stumbling upon the full spectral image of one of several burn fatalities reported to wander the mill. She shivered involuntarily. He had stood before her, his clothes in tatters, his skin bubbled and falling off his torched face, reaching out to her. Her scream had brought the others, but hadn't phased the specter. The arrival of Toff and Summer had made it flicker, then vanish altogether. Jean's fear and astonishment were two of the reasons Kurt took his self-appointed job of protector seriously.

She nearly jumped when a hand settled on her shoulder in the darkness.

"Relax," Toff said. "You sound like you're gonna hyperventilate. Thinking about the burned dude again?"

How does he know me so well? Jean wondered. She took a minute to get her breathing back under control and said, "I'm fine. Thanks."

From up near the shadowy line of teenagers, Autumn made her way back to them. "Kurt thinks he saw a beam of light when he walked out of the other end of the hall. Could be the security guard finally coming down to this end."

Jean nodded. "In that case, we better call it a night and get moving."

"Agreed," Toff said behind her, watching his sister for any sign of disagreement.

Instead, Autumn nodded and said, "I'll tell the others. We'll b-line it for the exit."

After the girl had gone and they'd all started moving again, Jean whispered, "She seems unusually agreeable tonight...not that she's normally disagreeable...."

A chuckle beside her helped her locate Toff in the gloom. "I know what you mean. I think she just feels out of place without Summer or Spring here," he whispered back.

They emerged from the dark hall into an area of the mill with offices to one side that overlooked lower floors on the other. The group crowded against the inside wall.

Kurt pointed to the lower floor, where Jean could just make out the cone of light from a flashlight playing to the left and right. She nodded and gave Kurt a thumbs-up.

The first step anyone made to sneak off the landing and out of possible discovery by a rent-a-cop, someone kicked an empty oil can tossed away years ago. It rattled and skipped across the floor, creating very little actual noise, but which rattled like ball bearings tossed across a tile floor.

Everyone froze as the noise traveled through the open space where the massive steel cradles and buckets for holding molten metal used to hang.

Seconds ticked by as everyone held their breath and watched the beam of light below. It continued its sweeping arc for a few heartbeats, paused, then started again.

Everyone began breathing again in a group "whoosh".

Before they moved on, Autumn punched Chad lightly in the shoulder and whispered, "Way to go, brainiac! You almost got us caught!"

Instantly, the beam of light arced up and the group found themselves completely lit up, like deer in an

oncoming car's headlights.

"Go!" Toff hissed, pushing Rena, who passed the push up the line and the whole group of them broke into a run.

Kurt lead the way. His keen eyes kept a lookout as they retraced their steps down the back passages. The group crossed a very unsafe metal bridge spanning the galvanizing tanks on the main floor, and up and down several sets of stairs.

On the final tall set of steel stairs, before the freedom of the exit, Jean tripped over her own feet and fell forward, right into Toff.

"Woah!" he exclaimed, trying to maintain his balance with the sudden added weight of Jean.

A moment later, she pushed off Toff's back and regained her balance. "Sorry," she muttered.

Flashing her a smile that may have meant more than 'It's okay,' Toff said, "I've often said that the clumsiest people I know are dancers and gymnasts."

The cocksure attitude filled Jean with passionate heat inside and she blushed again.

"Come on!" Rena said from behind Jean. "Move it!"

As one they burst from the side entrance. A sign above the door once read: Prep 4. The broken light fixture above it provided no illumination. The rains from the last few days reflected a faint glow from the far-off security lights, but still left the exit in shadow.

"Did we lose him?" Chad asked, bending over to catch his breath.

Scanning the dark parking area before them, Toff spotted something moving in the distance, off to their right. "I don't think it's *him* we have to worry about now." He tapped Kurt on the arm and pointed.

Kurt followed Toff's gaze and nodded. "Move," he said in the curious way of someone that knows how to speak, but can only feel the vibration of the words, not hear it in

his head.

With a wide empty space before them, the group of teens broke into a run, heading for the far east fence.

“Hey!” a man yelled behind them. “Stop where you are!”

“Not likely,” Toff muttered under his breath, taking up the rear position.

About half-way across the broken asphalt, Kurt dropped back to match pace with Toff.

“You go with them. I’ll distract the guard,” Kurt signed as they ran.

Toff shook his head and signed back, *“No way. We all go.”* At least, in the hurried rush he hoped that’s what he signed.

Kurt scowled and glanced over his shoulder. The guard chasing them had gained ground. Making a decision, he cranked up his speed again and in a few moments had outpaced the rest of the group.

“Hey, wait up, ya coward!” Chad wheezed as he tried to keep pace with the others. He had begun to fall behind.

Determined to get everyone to safety, Kurt dodged around two rusting scrap piles and a stack of leaking oil drums. There, he located the hole under the chain link fence where water running off a crack in the asphalt had eroded the dirt embankment. He bent nearly double, wedged himself into the wide opening and heaved up. The fence clanked and groaned loudly as he physically widened their escape route. Even with his strong stature, he had still only widened the hole enough to get them through easier than before. He just hoped that they had enough time.

After a few seconds, Autumn rounded the stack of drums and without pause darted under Kurt’s body and out to the dry creek bed beyond.

Rena and Jean ducked through next, then came a long pause where no one came round the oil drums.

The girls stood in the creek bed, panting and watching the fence, concern on each of their faces.

Kurt was about ready to abandon the opening and head back out to the parking lot, when Toff ran around the barrels, sliding to a halt beside him.

"Toast?" Kurt asked.

"Almost," Toff replied, winking at the play on words even as Chad stumbled his way into view. He breathed so heavily and staggered enough that he looked ready to collapse. He glanced at the gap in the fence, held his hands out and shook his head. "Can't...too tired..." he gasped.

Without hesitation, Toff called over his shoulder, "Heads up. Incoming." Then he grabbed Chad by the shoulders, nearly bent the sixteen-year-old double, and shoved him under the fence.

Kurt and Toff exchanged grins as Toff followed close behind Chad, then Kurt abandoned his position and joined the others as they ran – or staggered – up the creek bed. They were well out of view by the time the guard finally arrived at the property line.



Jean worked to calm her breathing and concentrated on not tripping over anything as they walked up the creek bed. Autumn and Rena were both silent behind her. Jean found this unusual...and a little disconcerting. "You two okay?"

Autumn looked past Rena walking between them and said, "We just got chased away from an investigation by a normal mortal guy. How are we suppose to take on something like the Mansion when we can't even handle people that are still body temperature and breathing?"

Jean shrugged. "In all fairness, he was a security guard and the last thing any of us need is to spend the rest of the summer in Juvi." Having any of their team thrown in Juvenile Hall would be disastrous to their investigations.

"Good point," Autumn said, "but still, are we ever

gonna be ready to tackle that place?”

From behind them, Autumn's little brother by forty-five minutes said, "I think we should do it immediately. I think we're ready. Plus, I know a way to get in without anyone catching us."

Jean smiled at Toff's enthusiasm, but wasn't sure she shared his optimism. "We've had some good cases, learned a lot and debunked plenty of claims," she said, "but I'm not sure we're really ready to take on something like the Mansion."

"But everyone that has lived there, or even tried to move into it, has come away completely freaked because of things they saw or heard...or both!" Toff reminded her, hungry anticipation in his voice.

Jean glanced back at him and stumbled on a loose stone. Rena helped her regain her balance, but her composure was shot.

"It doesn't help that everyone trying to live there is told all about the other claims of activity beforehand!" she snapped, then instantly wished she hadn't used that tone with Rena.

Toff pursed his lips and for a moment Jean wondered what scathing comeback he was swallowing.

"Look," she said. "I just don't want us going in there too soon and risking someone getting hurt...or worse. See?"

He met her gaze and the frustration in his eyes softened. "I understand. As the Team Lead, you're also trying to be a responsible, professional Lead Investigator. I get that. Just don't forget to trust the instincts of the rest of us."

His biting tone hurt, but Jean firmed her resolve. Instead of arguing with him further, she said, "Let's talk about this later, preferably when we haven't just narrowly escaped being caught and we're all jacked up on adrenaline."

Toff smiled crookedly and nodded.

That was why Jean liked having him as her Lead Investigator. He not only had an enthusiasm for the work and endless confidence in their team, he also knew when to back off and shelve a topic for discussion another time.

Once Kurt and Toff were sure no one waited to ambush them by their row of cars parked in the shadows of the trees that lined this far section of the creek, the Paranormal and Supernatural Society members climbed out of the river bed.

“Well, that was interesting,” Chad decided as he and Kurt walked over to the deaf boy’s yellow ‘80s Oldsmobile. He turned and leaned against it, looking across the ‘71 Challenger muscle car that Jean drove. “I’m guessing we won’t be going back there for a while.”

Kurt snapped his fingers urgently behind Chad, who turned to find a frustrated look on his friend’s face. “Sorry,” he said.

Rolling his eyes, Kurt asked, “*What do we do now?*”

Jean made a point of facing Kurt when she answered, “Tonight was pretty tight. What does everyone think?” She looked to him first.

“I think it’s too hot to do more there for a while.”

“Okay, that’s one vote for holding off. Anyone else?”

“With the County Fair starting in a few days, I could use a break, I guess,” Toff said, which surprised her. He was always the one pushing to keep up their rigorous practicing.

“Yeah,” Chad agreed. “I wouldn’t mind a few days of fun.”

“Yes, but I think we probably need to talk about tonight’s session before we forget about it,” Autumn suggested from where she stood at the passenger side of their Audi sedan. She shared it with her other three sibs, but today she was driving so it was “her” car.

Jean raised an eyebrow at the sensibility of Autumn’s suggestion.

"No problem. Let's meet at my place tomorrow and we can discuss it," Kurt suggested.

Toff agreed and said, "We can also discuss that other matter we talked about," directing the comment straight at Jean.

Jean agreed with a nod, too tired to debate the Mansion with him any further tonight.

It was just past midnight when the P.A.S.S. team loaded up and in a small chain of cars, emerged from the treeline. They crept down the dirt road in darkness to the junction at the main road. Then their headlights flicked on one-at-a-time as each pulled onto the asphalt and sped toward town.

“Night Terror at the Holiday House”

Jean Archer lived in what people around the resort town of Shadow Valley had come to start referring to over the years as “the Holiday House”. And for good reason. As she pulled onto their street, she could see the garish, multicolored light display of red, white, and blue lights and two American flags built out of miniature LEDs of the same patriotic colors, standing upright in the yard.

The house being illuminated this late told Jean she’d forgotten to let her folks know she would be late getting home. *How embarrassing!* Now everyone that knew her eccentric father left the lights on for her would know she was late.

Wishing for that earlier feeling of comfort and well-being to come back, she slid down in the seat. She could still see over the car’s long hood. But hopefully not in full view of any nosey neighbors, anxious that the entire street not be lit up like a 4th of July holiday tree.

At least the car didn’t screech in protest after she pulled it into its oil-stained spot beside the house and turned it off. Though technically this was her older brother Britt’s car, he’d handed her the keys to it the day he shipped out for the Middle East. “Take care of her,” he had said, “but I also expect you to drive her hard. That’s what she’s meant for.”

The memory made her smile, and a little sad. Britt

hadn't been home in over a year and there hadn't been any communication from him in nearly a month. Her folks told her that he was probably on a mission and couldn't communicate for safety reasons. She suspected they were right. After all, there hadn't yet been a pressed-and-dressed military officer standing on their front porch, his face a mask of stony non-emotion.

Jean grabbed her purse and the black hoodie sweat jacket she hadn't needed and bumped the driver's door closed with her hip. It didn't make a loud sound when it latched, but before she could make it around to the back door, the Holiday House blinked into darkness.

Inside, the home was draped in shadow. The custom security system allowed Jean's father, Devon, to control every aspect of the automation from key points in the house, including the master suite. Tonight he had waited until she arrived home, then turned off the exterior lights with a simple voice command. She guessed he was most likely in bed, or at his desk, writing.

At least he doesn't wait up for me to have heart-to-heart talks about why I'm out so late, she thought as she made her way through the house, trying to get to her bedroom without stepping on a child's toy left over from her mother's day care business, or banging and arm or leg on the edge of a doorframe or corner in the hallway.

Jean's bedroom was on the far west end of the top floor, facing the back of the house. Some of her friends preferred to have their room on the ground floor in the or basement, such as Kurt. To her it didn't matter much where her room was. She just didn't want it to face the street. It also had terrible window access, thanks to a rosebush that grew against the house. It was lousy for sneaking in or out, so she didn't worry about anyone trying to break in through her room.

Flicking on the overhead light brightened the room

with a cheerful warmth as she walked in and set her backpack on the chair by her workdesk and kicked off her sneakers. A fondness for decorating had lead her to drape long sheets of colored fabric from the corners along each wall, creating an inverted rainbow effect. She had strung white lace from the hanging light to the room's corners. She scattered black plastic spiders inside it during the Halloween season. Various other items personalized the space that was Jean's room: a photo of the P.A.S.S. team on the desktop, a poster of ballet shoes and a rose, her name written in Chinese on a plaque above her headboard, the red lace she'd woven through the metal bed rails.

Without a bathroom connected to her room, she walked to the one at the end of the hall. Flicking on the hall light as she passed the switch. The plush tan carpet felt good on her feet and was devoid of anything with sharp corners or edges.

She peered at herself under the bathroom's glaring white light. Evident were the makings of dark hollowness under her eyes that she suspected would worsen if she didn't start getting regular rest. Running her fingers through her tousled hair brought on a back-arching stretch.

"Man, that feels good!" she told herself with a smile. It turned to a frown as she opened the medicine cabinet. Inside was a haphazard collection of opaque amber prescription bottles, most with her name on them. Several attempts to control her vivid nightmares over the last few years had come and gone. Each left behind at least one amber bottle in its wake. They added up over time. *It looks like some druggie's wish come true*, she thought to herself, then snatched out the recent addition to the collection. Staring at it didn't fill her with comfort or leave her looking forward to a good night's sleep. She'd already skipped them the last couple nights. Hence the patchiness under her eyes. With the group almost getting caught tonight, she

didn't cherish the idea of being doped up in case someone, like maybe the cops, came a'callin'. *What a terrible excuse*, and she knew it. It did give her the motivation she needed to put the bottle back unopened and close the cabinet.

Her doctors assured her it would make the long nights tolerable. For her, the big frustration were the side effects: lethargy, dry mouth, upset stomach, but most of all it gave her the sensation of her brain being anesthetized. She didn't like the fact that she couldn't concentrate on anything after dosing. On the other hand, the medication did keep the nightmares away. She didn't hear the vague voices on the very edge of her perception, didn't see the flickering movement of someone – or *something* – moving in her peripheral vision, didn't get the creepy feeling of being stalked by a person, or persons, unknown. All of which she was certain had the worst of intentions for her. All those things she could deal with while awake, and did on a regular basis. When in the grips of such intense dreams as a child, however, she'd thrashed and screamed, waking everyone in the house. Side effects of the dreams included multiple trips to the hospital for bruises and broken bones, such as both arms and her ankle, thankfully at different times. Her dentist had done some work on her teeth when she'd bashed her face against the headboard of her bed. That had warranted fifteen stitches, too. She'd been concussed at least once, with two other possible times, and had to stay in the hospital for a couple days under strict observation. It was the hospital stay that had brought about the eventual medications that now did a really good job of controlling the night terrors.

"I'm a big girl now," she told her reflection in the mirror. "I don't need anything to keep the creepies away." With a resolute nod to herself, she turned away...and caught a flicker of something moving in her peripheral vision. When she looked to the corner of the room, nothing.

With determination she switched off the lights and left the room.

Resolved to prove her point, she clicked off the hall light, too, leaving her in deep shadow until she reached her half-closed bedroom door.

Aware she was being childish, she still stuck her tongue out at the dark hallway and closed her bedroom door behind her.

Jean archer stood at her bedroom window several minutes later. The almost full moon had escaped the storm clouds around it and for a moment shown down brightly. Its pale rays caused her white nightgown to almost glow. She loved the nighttime; the mystery of it enchanted her. She didn't scare easily, a bonus considering her hobby of investigating supernatural events and chasing ghost sightings. For her the night held no true fears...until she closed her eyes and sleep came.

She left the rose-colored drapes open to the moon's light as she climbed into bed. With the last of the excitement of running from the security guards still burning on her veins, she doubted that she'd get much sleep.

It descended upon her almost immediately.

She lay in her bed as the night wore on. A single white coverlet provided her modesty, should her father or mother check in on her. Her eyes moved rapidly back and forth as she slept, causing the lids to twitch.

The silence of the room shattered a heartbeat later when thunder crashed outside. The moon succeeded in penetrating the dark storm clouds with its bright rays into her room. As if riding down the almost visible white beams, something phantasmic descended into her room. It had no physical form or features, manifesting merely as a pale shadow against the darkness. The specter of a man once living, it had never "crossed over" into the Afterlife. It

remained a rider of the moon's rays, entering homes where it liked and as opportunity presented.

Tonight, it found its way to Jean Archer's room. It watched her from the window. Though lacking a physical form, the specter still experienced desire, heartache, and longing. The white cloudiness began rippling with dark streaks as it watched Jean sleep. Its emotions effected what little of itself remained. A tendril similar to a man's arm reached out to the girl. Then, as the tendril slowly lowered, the pale tan coverlet began to slowly slide off Jean's body. Something pulled at it from the foot of the bed. The coverlet dropped to the floor in just a few seconds. It left Jean asleep with her nightgown hitched up to her knees, exposing her legs to the white light. The dark rippling within the specter's form intensified and this time it reached two more tendrils toward the girl. Without waking, Jean Archer began to gently rise from the mattress. Her nightgown draped below her like the foresail of a ship and rippled in the light breeze from the open bedroom window. Jean didn't stir or awaken as she hovered four feet off the bed,. She lay still, supported by forces unseen.

The specter began to rotate the tendrils, causing Jean to mimic the movement. She rolled to her left until she lay suspended face-down over her bed. The movement caused the draping effect of her nightgown to expose the backs of her thighs nearly to her hips. The excited specter moved over to the bed. When it reached Jean, its shape blurred back into a indiscernible mass. When it took rough form again, it lay horizontal on the bed beneath her, as if staring up at her from where she lay moments ago.

Thunder rolled outside and heavy raindrops began pelting the exposed window sill.

Energized by the increasing power of the storm, the specter's tendrils raised again. This time they stretched all the way up around Jean's body. Gooseflesh raised where

they touched her. She shivered in her ever-intensifying dream state.

With tendrils wrapped around her, the specter began pulling the girl closer. The blackness rippling through it, almost consuming the whiteness of its image, and hinted of ominous intent.

A few inches were all that separated Jean from the specter when she suddenly stopped descending.

Not to be denied, the specter pulled harder. Jean edged closer, then drifted back up again, as if unable to penetrate an unseen barrier.

The specter's "head" moved right, then left. In the corner, it spotted the source of the interference. A woman stood there: tall, with long dark hair, clothed in leather armor and silver chainmail leggings, shrouded by a thin leather cloak and carrying a shoulder-high wood staff. She had the staff tilted toward Jean and her gaze intent upon the girl.

Its attention returning to Jean, the specter yanked and pulled on the girl. Thanks to the woman standing vigil, the teenager moved no closer. The frustrated specter lengthened its tendrils and wrapped them further around Jean.

The woman reached out with the staff. Swiping it from left to right and cut the tendrils, which blew away as white mist into nothingness.

The enraged specter pushed up and found it couldn't rise from the bed.

Small flickers of light rippled around the runes carved into the staff's surface.

The angry specter struck out at Jean. It pushed her across the room to slam into the far wall. The girl's eyes twitched faster, but she remained asleep. The specter threw her against the opposite wall. It slammed her against the corner, tangling her in the draped fabric and lace. The

specter also tried in futility to escape the woman's hold on it.

Each crash of Jean into the walls and ceiling was more forceful than the last, yet they failed to awaken the girl.

As a last attempt to break free, the specter aimed the girl at the open window and threw her at it. Just before Jean sailed out into the rain, the woman's staff pivoted to the right and halted her flight. She began floating back to her bed.

This distraction gave the specter the opportunity to abandon Jean's bed. It re-manifest as nothing more than the vague shape of a man near the bedroom door. Black shadows continued to roil through it. It gestured to the floor beneath it with its tendril arms and more ghostlike apparitions rose. Some were shapeless, others took on familiar shapes of people or animals. All had the same milky translucence and none of them looked friendly.

Surrounded now by fellow creatures of the ethereal realm the specter pointed at the woman and at Jean.

With the storm raging outside underscoring the attack, the creatures pounced on the woman and on Jean. The still-sleeping girl thrashed and tossed in mid-air as the creatures crawled upon her skin and pierced straight through her belly to emerge out her back. With each new attack she threw her head back, or tossed right or left to try and escape. With the woman in the corner fending off similar attacks, there was no where for Jean to retreat.

The storm outside reached a fever pitch and ball lightning raced down from the blackened heavens. It struck the ground below Jean's window. The phantasmic globe shattered into sparks of energy and light. Light so brilliant that for a moment it seared away the night. The thunder crash sounded like a multi megaton bomb detonating in the backyard. The windows rattled violently enough to almost shatter them and the shriek of car alarms echoed

out from all around the neighborhood.

It was all the woman needed. She grabbed the light with her staff and wrapped it around the wood like a glowing snake. Then she thrust it at the specter. The sheer brightness hit the creature, shattering it into nothingness. It vanished without even a cry of pain or anger at its demise. Every other creature evaporated with it and Jean collapsed back onto the mattress.

Jean sat straight up in her bed, sweat – not rain – coating her skin. She opened her eyes and stared straight into the rotting flesh of a man's corpse, his milky white eyes staring back into hers, the stink of him all around her. Then he smiled and she screamed.

At a flash of lighting, Jean opened her eyes, terror reflecting back into the darkness. Laying on her right side, facing away from the window, she breathed in heavy gulps of air, trying to wish her heart rate back to a more normal rhythm. She had almost succeeded when she felt the coverlet begin to twitch and slide. Her pulse jumped again. She could sense a presence on the bed behind her, tugging at the coverlet. Closing her eyes, she forced herself to breath normally, then rolled over and opened them. Scatters, the family's calico cat, stood on her bed beside her, frozen by Jean's movement. She had one clawed paw raised and the other mid-dig, where she had been prepping the bed to lay down.

Jean let out a great sigh. Relief flooded through her and she scratched Scatters' round face. Across the room, the window stood closed against the storm outside. Dark storm clouds now hid the moon from view. No one stood in the corner of the room; no massless form hovered nearby.

Shaking her head, Jean lay back and faced the window. Scatters' purred as she scratched her and it sounded loud

in the room. It was unlikely she would sleep more tonight, but she hoped having the storm and cat for company would help pass the hours until sunrise.



Jean wasn't sure what awakened her this time. It could have been an animal outside, or Scatters trying to get comfortable, possibly the stress of ballet practice earlier in the week. Likely it was a combination of everything.

Silently she sat up, slid her legs around until her feet touched the soft carpet of the throw rug beside the bed. *At least I don't have to walk across that cold, hardwood floor anymore.* Her mother had found the massive maroon area rug at a rummage sale and it fit her daughter's room like it was made for it.

Scatters glared at her. "Go back to sleep, kitty," she said, gently stroking the calico's soft fur. With an appreciating sniff, the family pet found another way to curl up and go back to sleep.

Jean walked over to the window.

Despite the streaks of rain, the strikingly bright moon set everything aglow in the back yard. Clear white light created deep shadows from the trampoline and swing set, unused since childhood. The shadow stretched long from the doghouse she and her father had built in anticipation of a large Labrador or Shepherd that had never joined the family.

Too bad, she thought. *A dog would have been nice company tonight.*

Her mind still foggy from sleep, Jean sat on the window seat and leaned against the window frame, letting her eyes wander as she dozed. After a few seconds, movement on the wide lawn below drew her attention.

What's that?

She watched as another Jean Archer, this one in a striking white dress attached at her wrists, danced gracefully

across the grass.

Oh, if only I looked that good, she mused as the image her mind's eye had created dipped and pirouetted, the white "wings" flowing like liquid silk all around her.

Jean had nearly lost herself in the waking dream, when a not-so-subtle change took place below. She danced without pause, twirling and gliding; the next moment the movement remained the same, but the context had shifted. Instead of being in a white ballet dress, she now moved in jeans and a closely fitted green blouse. That didn't concern her as much as what she held in her hands.

What the...?

Instead of the white skirt at each wrist, her hands clasped the hilt of a glowing red sword. About three feet long, the blade left a faint pink trail as it cut through the air. Thrust, sweep, overhand strike, the blade moved with deadly accuracy through the steps and movement Jean vaguely recognized as dance techniques learned throughout the years. It looked less like sword fighting and more like dancing with the sword as an extension of her arms.

Where's this coming from? I've never held a sword in my life!

After several heartbeats watching herself moving back and forth across the grass, the red sword leaving its short, pink phantom streaks behind it, Jean shook her head in disbelief and smacked it solidly into the window frame. She shook her head again, this time from the jarring impact; when she looked back down to the yard it was as empty as when she gazed upon it only minutes before.

What was that all about? she wondered.

With the memory of the dance-turned-swordplay fresh in her mind, Jean returned to her bed. Once again irritating Scatters, she pulled the light covers over her, rolled onto her side and gazed out the room's only window. Sleep returned much sooner than she expected.