

SOULSTEALER

BOOK 2: STEVEN



SHANE BOULWARE



THEORYbee

**“Faith is taking the first step even when
you don’t see the whole staircase.”**

Martin Luther King, Jr.

“If you’re going through hell, keep going.”

Winston Churchill

“It always seems impossible until it’s done.”

Nelson Mandela

CHAPTER 7

NOW YOU SEE US...

Jeff couldn't hold back the anticipation any longer. He spent most of his Saturday with Sara and Trista, so Sara indulged his request, giving him three hours to what Jeff hoped would be round two of the young man completing the exchange.

He took way more time than needed drafting an email to the Solis Commandery—the Ordo Solis' headquarters in Europe. Jeff realized he should only send the message after analyzing every second of those videos, as he had made the opposite decision several years before with disastrous results.

I'll figure it out once I see you get accepted, Jeff thought.

He sat in front of the TV wearing his favorite blue jeans and least favorite shirt. Sara had bought it for him and said it was salmon-colored. Jeff still swore it was pink, but he wore it today in hopes it'd make her smile. He glanced at the wall clock—8:00 PM on the dot. Jeff's fingernails dug into the desk while he waited for 8:30. Right on schedule, the Gatekeeper arrived. About ten seconds later, the young man approached him. Jeff wanted to jump up and down.

“C'mon, let's go, boy! Tell the Gatekeeper what he wants to hear,” he urged the television. They went through the exact same sequence the night before, but the young man appeared more confident this time.

The young man set the hat on the table and said something, causing the Gatekeeper to narrow his eyes. He picked up his hat and put it on, proceeding to the bookcase door. The young man followed the Gatekeeper into the VIP section, and the bookcase swung closed behind them.

Jeff stared at the screen, dumbfounded, before fumbling for his laptop. “Focus!”

He navigated to the newly minted video file, attaching it to the draft email.

The computer *dinged*, indicating the task was completed, and he heard a knock at the front door. His head jerked toward the sound, only to be greeted by a pistol barrel in his face. A figure wearing a mask depicting a face twisted in agony held the weapon.

Jeff’s heart sank, and his face paled; he recognized the mask worn by the Raptors.

“Answer the door,” the figure said. His voice sounded artificial, as if altered by some sort of mouthpiece filter. The Raptor stepped closer when Jeff didn’t move and pressed the silencer muzzle against Jeff’s forehead.

His mind paralyzed with fear, Jeff stood and inched his way toward the office room door. A sharp jab from the muzzle rewarded his efforts, an invitation to pick up the pace.

Time slowed as Jeff walked the few feet to the front door. He looked back at the Raptor in the office doorway, weapon pointed his direction. Jeff’s felt the entire neighborhood heard his shaking fingers as they reached for the copper knob. Before he could turn it, the door opened and six or so Raptors forced their way in...each wearing a mask with the face twisted in agony, rage, or despair.

Jeff’s vision blurred; his knees buckled. A few moments ago, he discovered an extraordinary secret, like Robert Langdon in *The Da Vinci Code*. He forgot about Langdon getting chased by the secret’s deadly guardians.

CHAPTER 28

REGAL

Steven's eyes fluttered open amid a series of subtle pokes. He found himself slouched in an armrest chair, propped up by a pillow, still in front of a lit fireplace.

An agreeable-looking man teetered over him. He wore an oval pince-nez; the kind that only hung by gripping the upper bridge of his nose. After everything the Soulstealer put him through, Steven felt desensitized to what he once considered ordinary. But even violent desensitization couldn't convince him this guy looked normal.

No more than five feet, the man sported a long brown tailored coat with a billowing white shirt underneath. A dark green vest buttoned up his torso with a golden chain hanging from the front pocket.

Is that a pocket watch? Steven wondered in amusement.

The small man shifted his weight, adjusting his stance and drawing attention to his tan plaid pants.

Steven trembled in silent laughter, wondering how far back in time he traveled for this bloke to be real. The man scrutinized Steven as if expecting something. Steven stood, hunching over as he worked out the kinks of his comfortable snooze. When Steven stopped moving, only then did the little man speak.

“Steven.” He addressed him in a British accent, face as bland as his words.

Steven tilted his head in exaggeration. “Mr. Well-Dressed-Gentleman-of-the-Court.”

The man’s face flushed as he glanced down at his outfit before assuming a rigid posture and pushing his shoulders back. “We have pressing matters to discuss.”

“I’m still talking to Solis Europe, right? Not British royalty I assume.” Steven grinned.

“Don’t be absurd,” the man protested, straightening his huge tie.

Steven gestured to the man. “Let’s just get this part out of the way. You look like you’re dressed to go see Queen Elizabeth. No one dresses like that, not even my great-grandfather. I can’t tell if that’s how you normally are, or you just came from a Renaissance reenactment.”

“Yes, yes, I understand my attire is rather unusual. But we live in unusual times.” The gentleman winked.

“That doesn’t...that doesn’t even make sens—”

“Now!” the man interrupted. “I’m told that Solis America was working on a plan to oust the Satan in the most public of ways. Could you please illustrate your intentions?”

Steven pointed in the direction the man came from. “Sure, right after you walk Raeligh through that door.”

The man huffed with frustration. “We’re working that out, Steven, but for now—”

“I’ve been told what I should do ‘for now’ since the Soulstealer’s return. Bring me Raeligh, *now*.”

“We can’t just make her magically appear.”

“I don’t care how you do it. Just do it.”

“Steven, please. We need your help. Our world is under siege once more from the Satan himself. We must stop him.”

“And I’ve every intention of doing just that. *After* Raeligh and I see each other.”

The man stared at Steven for several seconds before turning around and walking out of the room. He returned a few minutes later, crossing his arms.

“There has been a complication with the recovery of your friend.”

Steven narrowed his eyes. “Complication, *how*, precisely? And she’s not just *my* friend. She’s Ordo Solis.”

“There was an engagement with the Satan’s forces; we have not reinitiated contact with our away team just yet.”

“Then I’ll be waiting here till you do.”

“Well, that just won’t do.”

“Listen, Winston Churchill. Raeleigh and I are all that’s left of Solis America. The rest are either dead, moved on with their lives, or traitors. We’ve been carted halfway across the world. I’ve watched innocent people murdered. I’ve been shot at. Tortured. And had to have stupid conversations like these for months.” Steven paused to catch his breath. “Give me the *f***ing* love of my life back. Now, b****.”

The gentleman grew crimson. Steven couldn’t tell whether it was from rage or embarrassment.

“This way,” the gentleman said, whipping around and proceeding back out of the room.

Steven trailed the man past several people eating in a kitchen. They trudged up a flight of narrow wooden stairs that groaned with each step and stopped in front of a closed door, knocking four times.

The door opened, and Steven found himself looking at a well-equipped surveillance room. He spied camera feeds, radios, bionic ears, cameras, and motions detector bulbs. Steven spent a lot of time perusing most of these gadgets on Amazon, waiting in vain for Solis America to fund his wish list.

Steven recognized George among several people sitting at a computer station.

George waved. His green eyes lit up with surprise. “Welcome to our listening post, chap.” He turned his attention to the well-dressed gentleman. “What can I do for you, Mr. Hoche?”

So that’s his name, Steven thought.

“Steven here needs a debriefing on the latest development,” Mr. Hoche said.

George gave a sluggish nod. “Right then, come on over here.”

Steven complied. His eyes bore holes into the computer screen as

George accessed a body cam video, and Steven willed it to show him what he wanted to see.

“Mate, before I show you this, I must warn you. It’s very nasty stuff. Did not go well for us.”

A jolt of fear ripped through Steven’s spine, striking his heart. He struggled to compose himself, biting his tongue as he took a seat next to George. “Hit it.”

