

Misplaced

Another corpse being carried out of Misplaced. Not what I'd hoped to see upon my arrival at the combination strip club and bar. But not particularly surprising either.

"Hey Ralph," I greeted the dour cop walking beside the corpse-bearing gurney. "What happened this time?"

"The name's Raymond, asshole. Officer Raymond Barber. Now piss off before I arrest you as an accessory," he told me with a scowl.

"I'm confused. Is it Raymond Asshole or Raymond Barber? Officer Asshole maybe?"

"Sorry officer," Lonzo declared hastily as he rushed over and began dragging me inside. "He's always a bit cranky when someone's been murdered."

"Keep a leash on him," the officer growled to Lonzo. To me he growled, "I'll be keeping an eye on you, Dennis Ward." To which I made the sign of the evil eye and he made a quick gesture to ward off evil before hurrying along. I didn't like being threatened... even when the threats were veiled and halfhearted.

Not releasing my arm, Lonzo half-dragged me through the strip club to the back offices. He was one of the few people I'd allow to do that. Along the way I couldn't help but see the tape body outline on the floor.. or the huge blood stain across it. Not only that but I also noticed that only a couple of customers and two of the dancing girls remained inside. Assuming they hadn't run during the killing, the rest of both lots had probably fled as soon as it became obvious the police were on their way. Drugs, guns, and not distant enough criminal pasts were only a few of the likely reasons for them not waiting to talk to the cops.

"Lonzo," I began, pushing a pile of nudie magazines out of a chair before sitting on the arm of it, "I warned you about the damned fascination spells. Sure, they bring you return customers but inevitably someone's gonna go nuts and kill the object of their fascination. I'm guessing it was indeed one of the dancers who got killed this time and not one of the wait staff?"

"Yeah, Brice, you warned me. But that's not the case this time. Hell, I almost wish it was. No. Someone whacked Ricky Valentine. Someone put down a goddamned Agent of Salvation right here in my own personal strip joint. This *cannot* go unanswered by the powers Brice. You know that and I know that. You gotta help me. Find who did it and find them fast. Find them before divine agents start coming around asking questions and running off all my customers. Or worse. Hell, do this and I'll wipe your tab clean and even give you a line of credit."

I sighed. I really didn't like working for friends. And Lonzo was about the closest thing to a friend I had left in my life. "There's more to it than that. You'll owe me."

"Big, medium, or small?" he asked seriously.

"Probably medium," I replied quietly. "Ricky was well known. Well liked and respected too. It's very unlikely he was killed lightly. Speaking of which, just how was he killed?"

"Sawed-off double barrel at close range. Brimstone packed shells with a different curse on each bit of buckshot. The security spells went nuts for a minute after the shooting. The shell casing must have had some sort of masking spells on them or something. And even with all the curses and the damage, it still took Valentine a couple of minutes to die. He absolved Jessi of all her sins before he passed. We won't be seeing her again, dammit. Her knockers alone were worth a couple of grand a month. Anyway, the shooter ran as soon as he fired. Took the piece with him. Fellow wasn't a

regular. Still, I've seen him a time or two though. Medium height, dark skin, stocky guy. Bad skin on his face... acne scarring I think. As I recall, he was dressed in jeans both times he was here. Button up cowboy shirts with silver stitching too. No hat though." Lonzo had a good memory. A real good memory. Somewhere along the way he'd learned too much and had decided to disappear himself before someone else did it for him. Hence the name of his club.

"Keep the place closed for a few days," I advised. "It might help. I can also come back and remove the fascination spells if you like because divine agents *will* come to investigate before I'm finished with the case. Unless of course the killer happens to be standing outside waiting for me. Which I doubt." A moment passed, "Lonzo... are you sure you want me to find out who did this?"

"Yeah, remove the spells. And if you'll point out the responsible party to Ricky's Association... yes. Hell yes. I know most people are more afraid of the Infernal Brokers than the divine, but I know better. Find who did this Brice. Find 'em fast."

"Alright Lonzo. I've gotta go prepare. I'll be back in an hour. Don't be here."

"Don't worry buddy. I'm gonna go trigger my most powerful warding spell and drink enough to pass out for a day or two."

"Be careful. This is unusual."

"Yeah. And around here unusual is trouble. I know. You be careful, too. Don't get yourself done in." With a nod I turned and walked away. The building I leased wasn't a very long walk away. Aside from liking Misplaced in general, it had a convenience that appealed to my lazy side.

Back in my bedroom, I changed clothes. If I was working, I had an image to maintain. Part of the contract I worked under. Part and parcel to the reason my only friend would still owe me a favor for something I would have preferred to have done for free. But that was a luxury I no longer had. Had not had since right after the Change.

No, I worked for the Gray Angels now. They had given me the majority of my... special... talents. They'd also saved my life. Delayed my day of Judgement. And thus I collected favors for them.

Looking back was easy. I could clearly remember that day twelve years ago when the archangel Gabriel appeared on every television and radio station across the world simultaneously. I remembered his voice coming from the speakers and from all around me. There was no escaping the sound of his words. The power and the meaning. No matter the language. No matter the hearing impairment.

"The world as you know it is ending," he'd begun as everyone on the planet stopped what they were doing to listen. I'd been in my car driving to work at the assembly plant. The song on the radio had simply stopped and a few seconds later the great angel had begun speaking. I never had any doubt of who it was or that it was real. No one I'd spoken to since had either. Everyone on the highway had pulled over or stopped their cars to better listen. "The world shall continue. Many of you shall not." That had certainly turned out to be one of the greatest understatements of all time.

"There is goodness and purity on earth... even as there is vileness and filth. I shall begin the cleansing process. It is time for some of the worst offenders to be meet justice. Prepare yourselves you who have taken the life or lives of your fellow man in the name of God. Any who have taken a life in His name will have their life assessed and the dead shall bear witness. All those who have murdered in the name of God are hereby called to Judgement...NOW." It is said that the wave started in Jerusalem and spread out from there in an ever expanding circle that eventually enveloped the globe. And as it passed, those who'd committed murder in the name of God died. Whatever name their faith, creed, or religion had for God didn't matter. The guilty simply dropped dead. None of

the people sharing the highway fell over so at that time I had only the suspicion of what had just happened and it gave me to comfort whatsoever.

That's when I noticed the woman standing next to my car. I'd been driving with the windows down to better enjoy the cool morning air. Unlike everyone else, she didn't seem to be paying attention to the words of the archangel. Instead, she seemed focused upon me.

"He'll next call to Judgement all those who have used the name of God to lead another astray," she told me, drawing my full attention to her. "As you have so done."

"I was young..." I began but couldn't finish. My excuses would wither before divine Judgement even as they failed upon my lips.

"Sign this," she said, handing me a parchment contract as well as a silver pen.

"What...?" I began but she quickly interrupted me.

"You don't have much time. If he pronounces the trump before you sign, you'll pass from this world and you *will* be judged. The contract states that you'll work for us. We will give you powers and you will aid us in our mutual quest... to work ourselves back into His good graces." She seemed to read my mind then. "There is no fine print. Sign while you still have time."

I had no way of knowing it then but at that moment the wave generated by Gabriel speaking the first trump had just finished enveloping the world. All those who'd committed murder in the name of God were now dead. Most of them were now in line to get their one-way tickets to Hell.

"My second and final act of cleansing for today..." the archangel began.

"Hurry!" the woman yelled, desperation tinging her voice.

I wasn't ready to face Judgement. I knew I'd done wrong earlier in my life. Some nights I still dreamed about it. I signed. Except at first the pen didn't write. After restarting my signature a second time, it finally put red ink to parchment. Handing the pen and parchment back to her, I realized that my fingers were bleeding. The pen had taken in my blood and transferred it down to the contract.

"Don't worry," she told me, reaching out a quick hand and drawing something on my forehead.

"...through insidious word led another to kill in the name of God," Gabriel continued. "You are hereby summoned to Judgement... NOW." The world seemed to go silent for a moment and then I heard a rushing sound, as though a great tidal wave was sweeping across the land towards me. I never saw it but the sound utterly terrified me. A pale glow surrounded me and the terrible sound washed over me, leaving me alive and breathing heavily. In the wake of the wave passing I was a bit surprised to find myself still sitting in my car with the morning sun shining down upon me. The woman still stood there as well, looking every bit as relieved as I felt.

"A new era is at hand," the archangel stated. "Celebrate, repent, and prepare yourselves." Then his voice was simply gone. A few seconds later the music started up again.

The woman walked around, opened my passenger-side door, and sat down next to me. "Congratulations Brice Ward," she said seriously. "You have a new job."

Twelve years later I was still doing the same thing begun that day and I did indeed have a new job working for my friend Lonzo. But the world had changed. People had changed. The world today no longer bore much resemblance to that world of twelve years ago.

Walking into my workshop, I began gathering the tools of my trade. A tiny vial filled with angel tears went into my pants pocket; in case I needed to heal one of the blessed. Protecting the innocent was one of my charges. The world had grown tougher in many ways and I couldn't always get there in time to prevent bodily damage. Didn't always get there in time to prevent them from

dying either.

Moving to one of the benches, I gathered my two opposing casting blades, one from a tiny but hallowed shrine and the other from the silver circle meant to contain the evil within. Each knife had a six inch blade but that was about the only resemblance one bore to the another. The blade from the silver protection circle had a handle formed from a devil's head horn while the blade had been made in a forge of hellfire powered by misery. The blade was unpleasant looking and seemed to leave an invisible stain on my hand every time I picked it up. I only touched it with my left hand. Part of the reason I literally have a wicked left hook.

The other casting blade was so beautiful as to almost be mesmerizing. The blade was purest silver with a handle of unicorn horn. Upon the blade was etched the pattern of a feather from an angel's wing. Perhaps the feather had been actually used in the creation of the blade. I didn't know. I've been told that for the handle, the unicorn had stepped out of a dream and sacrificed its horn and therefore its magic so that this dagger could be created. After the last few years, I no longer doubted this was true. This blade also left its mark upon me causing me to remember things I'd rather not remember. Relive again and again those moments that would most likely lead to my damnation on the day I faced Judgement.

Remember when the church used to tell you that all you had to do was repent and all would be well? Those of us who survived the first two trumps had certainly all found out that it wasn't that simple. The church had been setting up its own rules for years. Their rules, not God's. In the early days, they used the bait of eternal salvation through repentance to draw in new members. Later, they sold forgiveness to gather gold. Certainly there have been many, many priests who thought they were doing the Lord's work. Perhaps some of them were. But as a whole, they'd tried to put the church and clergy between everyone and God. The true servitors of God had returned to disabuse the churches and priests of the world of this fantasy.

No one stepped between a person and God.

Lonzo of all people told me I was too critical of priests. Said that there were a lot of them, the majority even, who helped people. Truly did shepherd their flocks towards the light. I'd seen too many leading their congregations in whatever direction pleased the priest to believe that the majority of them were on the path of the righteous. This remained a continuing disagreement between us.

Regardless of which of us was more correct, people had certainly been given free will. And it was very much possible for someone to willingly turn away from God. Commit acts that forced oneself away. Some had allowed themselves to be led astray. In an odd sort of way, I supposed I was one of them. Others turned their backs upon the Creator from shame or fear or any number of reasons that seemed valid but were foolish in the extreme. Now I desperately tried to work my way back into His favor. And I had found that doing this was not as quick or easy as turning away had been.

Sheathing the two blades on opposite hips in sheathes specially made to contain the powers within them, I opened up the cabinet below the bench and pulled out a floppy leather flask. Nearly empty. Pulling out a container of salt, I refilled the flask. Protection circles could be very important for me. Both demons and angels disliked me and my employers. A salt circle was usually good for keeping out either. Usually. The flask strap went over my shoulder and the flask itself into a large outside pocket of my trench coat.

I hadn't liked the trench coat. It was black and made me feel like I should have been in a Keanu Reeves movie. Upon the back was the symbol of the Gray Angels in silver. A smaller one just like it on the left side of the chest. My bosses. The angels who'd stood aside during Lucifer's

rebellion and had taken no sides. Cast out of heaven yet not damned. They too wanted back into God's good graces. And they needed someone working for them here who could not be cast out easily and who could blend in with the locals when circumstances demanded. They'd been waiting for the Change and for the Great Seals to come down for a long time. They'd known that neither Heaven nor Hell liked them. A trend that continued to this day.

To be sure, this didn't do anything to increase my popularity either. Like my employers, angels and demons alike spat on me. It could have been worse. And with Ricky Valentine being murdered, it was likely to get that way. Fast.

Frowning in thought, I walked into my bedroom and picked up the amulet hanging from a necklace woven of many metals that I'd left draped over the bedpost. The amulet was a heavy disk. Perfectly circular, the inside made up of intertwined vines of silver, gold, copper, bronze, and platinum. This was my armor. The vines formed symbols, glyphs, runes, and more. Protection spells, intertwined so as to leave me very hard to kill. All I had to do was put the thing on.

Damn but I hated this part.

My fingers were already tingling from the arcane bleedover. The amulet was powerfully enchanted. One-handed, I unbuttoned my shirt as the first beads of sweat sprang up on my forehead. The magical disk had to touch bare flesh in order to work properly. The tingling became stronger, a mild precursor of the pain that was to come. A twisted smile crossed my lips briefly as I realized once again there was no one I could pray to for mitigation of the pain to come. The amulet was neither blessed nor cursed but worked against both powers equally. Neither Heaven nor Hell would ease my pain. But Lonzo needed my help. Someone had killed an important man. An unwaveringly good man. I supposed in a way, he needed my help too. And somewhere along the line maybe I'd be able to help enough people to get myself undamned.

I had to hope.

As the first fearful bead of sweat ran down into my eye, I picked up the mouthpiece off my nightstand and bit down. Lord, I hated this part. Taking a deep breath, I pulled the amulet's chain over my head.

Despite the fact that the disk itself only moved a couple of inches, the thing seemed to slam into my chest like a sledgehammer. My world jerked and with no great surprise I found myself on the floor looking up at the ceiling. Arcane writing from the protection spells I'd drawn there stared down at me. Then the real pain began as the disk began burrowing into my skin at the outside edges of the disk. There would be no blood. In all the times I'd put the amulet on, I'd never found so much as a single drop of blood. Except for that first time when I'd bitten my tongue. Ariella, the gray angel I worked with most often, had warned me, but being the macho, stupid person I sometimes was, I hadn't listened. Sudden pain from my chest muscles being torn through had me screaming through the mouthpiece. Wide-eyed and breathing heavily, I waited for the next part... the worst part. It didn't take long.

In a moment of pure, silent clarity, I felt the first edge of the amulet touch the bone of my sternum. With a force that literally bounced me off the floor, it suddenly clove to me, pushing aside bone as it melded into me. Screaming in agony, I could feel all the vines contained within the amulet burst free from the constricting disk as they raced throughout my body, wrapping around bones and expanding out over and through my muscles. I screamed until I ran out of breath and then screamed some more.

And suddenly it was over. I lay on the floor panting and sweating but the pain was gone as though it had never been. Shaking, I pulled out my mouthpiece and set it back on the nightstand.

Still trembling, I staggered to the bathroom and splashed a little water in my face. In the mirror, the two ends of the amulet's necklace came down from around my neck and disappeared into my chest just above my sternum. I took a couple of deep, calming breaths and began buttoning up my shirt. It took a while but as I finished with the last button, my trembling stopped.

Time to go to work.

On my way out the door, I picked up a couple of collapsible batons and stuck them in the outside pockets of the coat. Nothing particularly special about them. They were just good at helping adjust certain normal people's attitudes.

Walking away, the door closed itself behind me. Ariella had worked the outside protections on the building years ago. Back when I'd barely known one end of a spell from another. Back when we were just beginning to understand how very drastically the world was changing.

There were seven great seals. Set by God Himself, these seals separated our world from the other realms. Two weeks after Gabriel had sounded the first two trumpets, the archangel Azrael came. Azrael appeared to us as a woman whereas Gabriel had looked like a man. Like Gabriel she was suddenly on all television and radio channels and her voice carried through the air in time with the tv and radio. The archangel of death advised us that all the great seals were weakening. And then with a gentle smile she pulled out a scythe and struck the great oval disk behind her. A hole appeared in it. She struck it again and the hole became larger. The third time she struck it, the entire thing collapsed and I felt that... something... something important... had changed. Turning back to us, Azrael calmly informed us that the first of the great seals had now fallen. The doorway between earth and the land of the dead was now open. And with that she vanished. A few seconds later the television program came back up to the football game I'd been watching. Except that there was no more game. Everyone simply stood there looking at each other. A few of the coaches and referees halfheartedly tried to get the game restarted, but most of the players and staff simply walked off the field.

Over the next couple of days, many people feared that zombies would rise up out of graves and those who died wouldn't realize they were dead and would continue going about their lives as though they still lived. We learned that wasn't the case.

No.

That all came later.

So the doorway between us and the lands of the dead had been opened. This was really bad news for murderers. They were often visited with visions of the angry dead. Most of us had a chance to talk to friends and family who had passed on. To be honest, I found it rather pleasant. The dead had a lot of interesting stories. Indeed, it was my grandfather, now long dead, who pointed out that it had indeed taken an act of God (acting through Gabriel) to get the democrat-loving press to stop attacking the president. It hadn't stopped them from trying to foist off on us their pick for who should be the next president, but at least they'd stopped attacking the current president.

On my way down the sidewalk back to Misplaced, I spotted a man walking his dog through the empty lot to my left. As though illustrating the memory for me, he walked himself and his beagle right through a fence. At least he was most likely one of the dead. When he walked through the wall of a house and left a breath of frost upon the window, I had my proof. At least as much proof as I needed for a man walking a dog. Had he been nearer the club or closer to the shooter's description, I would have required much more proof of his true nature.

Today everything was much more complicated than it had been twelve years ago. Today dreams could kill. Angels and demons walked the streets. Some in disguise, some openly what they

were. Creatures from Eden that had not been good enough to come to earth now did just that. Exiles from the magic lands now had free reign to come and go as they pleased. Magic warred with science for dominance. Fortunately, those two rule sets seemed to have reached an equilibrium. Some of the storms generated from their clashing had been terrible in the extreme.

There were even more police cars, both marked and unmarked, at Misplaced as I walked up. No reporters though. That surprised me a little. I would have expected Ricky's death to have made the five o'clock news throughout the state. Maybe tomorrow.

A bored looking cop stopped me at the front door. "This place is closed for the duration of an ongoing police investigation," she stated, looking less bored now that she'd had a chance to look me over and she could see the small silver insignia on the left front breast of my trench coat.

"That's why I'm here," I told her, moving to step through the door anyway.

Holding up her hand, she stepped in front of me. "You are not going inside until my sergeant tells me otherwise."

Reining in my impatience, I took a deep breath. "Alright. Call him or her." With a watchful nod, she did so.

A minute or so later an older cop showed up followed by Charli Rhodes. Didn't know the sergeant. Knew Rhodes though. She was a sorceress. Had been freelance but a few years ago the department had made her an offer and she'd become a specialist with a rank and paygrade equivalent to captain. Years ago, cops and militaries around the world had learned that if they didn't have at least one high order magic worker on their side, they were in deep trouble.

"Hi Charli," I greeted her.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she asked bluntly.

"It's good to see you too," I replied with smirk.

"This the fellow who wants in?" the sergeant asked while trying to keep an eye on both myself and the sorceress.

"Yeah, sarge," the cop at the door replied, looking like she'd rather be elsewhere. Charli had a reputation for having something of a bad temper and for using magic while in a temper. The results could be quite unpleasant.

"Answer my question," she growled.

"I'm investigating the murder for a friend," I replied as my mood dropped a bit.

"I don't think so," she replied.

"I don't care what you think," I told her with a smile. "I'm going to investigate this. I'm *charged* to investigate this. There is no longer any other possible outcome. I must obey the terms of my contract."

"You sold your soul, scum," she spat with no small helping of derision.

"And just how did you gain control over your own spellcraft so quickly?" I asked with a wicked grin.

"Always quick to go for the jugular, aren't you Ward?"

I turned to the two officers who for some reason remained with us, "I'm am going through that door. You can try to stop me if you like. However, under the 'Powers' clause in your job descriptions, you are expressly exempt from being required to act against an agent of one of the great supernatural powers. And I am very much one of those agents."

"I've heard enough," the sergeant said, snapping a handcuff onto my left wrist. "You and Specialist Rhodes can hash it all out downtown."

"Sorry fellow, it doesn't work that way," I told him. Making a fist with my left hand, I

squeezed briefly and then quickly popped my hand open. Pieces of the handcuffs dropped to the ground. “I don’t have a choice. I *have* to go inside. You *do* have a choice. You can decide to try and stop me and risk ending up like your ‘cuffs, or you can decide that there’s a damn good reason the ‘Power’s’ clause is in your contracts. It’s up to you.”

“Go on,” Charli told the beat cop and the sergeant. “I’ll escort him around and make sure he doesn’t screw up the crime scene.”

“That was a fast turn around on your part,” I said, keeping a wary eye on her as we walked inside and the other two cops walked away with many a glance over their shoulders.

“I realized that you were bound by your contract to do this. No choice as you said. I may not like you, but I’m not interested in fighting you either.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“Who hired you?” she asked.

“Sorry, that’s strictly confidential,” I replied absently, reaching into my coat pockets. My left hand reached on through the pass through fold at the back and grasped the handle of the casting blade on my hip. “You should know better than to ask.”

“I’m doing my job,” she replied. I slowly pulled the blade from its sheath. “What was that?” she asked, looking around as her right hand dipped into her pocket and she looked around quickly. There had been a clearly felt aura of evil that pulsed through the room as the blade came free of the sheath’s protections.

“What was what?” I asked aloud as I moved the tip slowly and began removing the fascination spells built into the stage.

“Don’t play dumb with me!” she snarled, as her defenses began popping into place one at a time. “You felt it just as I did. And it came from your direction!” Had she been able to see magic at that moment, she’d have seen the last of the spells being yanked off the stage and back into the casting blade. Fortunately, she hadn’t raised that ability yet.

“Perhaps I did feel something,” I admitted as I resheathed the blade. “However, I assure you, it wasn’t me.” Which was true. It had been one of my blades. When it came to truth, I spent a lot of time splitting hairs.

Her defenses were now all the way up, giving her a faintly visible glow to normal eyes. For abnormal eyes, like my own, she was covered in several overlapping defensive spells. Spells versus elements and powers. Anti-hex enchantments. Protections from physical harm. A nice array. One that the entire forensic team now stared at.

“What a pretty glow,” I said before walking away from her and over to the tape outline on the floor.

Embarrassed, she chased after me. “Get away from there!” she growled.

Using just a touch of power, I momentarily altered my eyes to look like chromed steel and caused a blue light to shine through my pupils. For some reason this was frequently enough to get people to leave me alone. But just in case it wasn’t, in a magically-enhanced, dread voice, I commanded, “Do not interfere mortal!” People who didn’t stop bothering me due to the eye trick usually left at this point. Worrying about me was one thing. Me possibly channeling one of my angelic backers was a whole other story. The crime scene team left en mass. Charli remained though she did take a large step back.

In a normal voice, I said, “We’re going to have to go to the morgue and look at the buckshot that killed him. Brimstone rounds are all custom jobs. Cursed buckshot will be too. Maybe we can figure out who made the rounds. With a lucky break, that’ll lead us to the killer.”

“How did you know he was killed with cursed buckshot?” she demanded, pulling out a short, iron casting wand. That must have been what she’d been fingering when she’d felt the dagger’s evil a moment ago.

“I spoke with an eye witness before I went home and changed,” I replied, looking over the area around the body.

“Mephistopheles’ ass you did,” she replied, pointing the wand at me. “Now tell me the truth.”

“Charli,” I said in a near whisper, “You know I don’t like being threatened.”

“And you know I don’t like being lied to!”

“Point the wand elsewhere,” I told her. “Or go ahead and use it. Otherwise you’re about to gain first hand knowledge of why most people prefer not to mess with me.”

“I’m not afraid of you,” she stated.

“I know. And that’s your biggest problem at the moment.” From each pocket I pulled a casting blade as I stood to face her. Details of her protective spells that I’d missed before now became plainly apparent. The wand was a nasty piece of work but held no inherent evil. Only power. It was a powerful casting aid with a predilection for electrical spells. Chump work compared to what I held in my hands.

“Azrael’s garters,” she breathed.

“I’m glad to see you’re starting to get the picture,” I said, keeping one eye on her even as something drew my attention across the room. Slowly, I walked over to the place on the wall that had drawn my eye. And there it was. A small hole from a stray piece of buckshot. Sitting in the back of the hole was the cursed piece of steel itself.

Just then the front doors were ripped away and in strode a very angry angel in all his righteous glory. So far as angels went, he wasn’t terribly powerful. Which meant he was still more than a match for me.

Staring at the angel, Charli’s wand dropped from numb fingers. I backed as far away from him as I could. He ignored the both of us and walked to stand in front of Ricky’s tape outline on the floor. He seemed to be looking at something that had already happened as his eyes moved around following things I could not see. After standing a moment, he nodded to himself. “Yes, a good end.”

Looking up, he seemed to notice Charli for the first time. His eyes narrowed slightly and she flinched back from his gaze. He then noticed me and he frowned. “You! What are you doing here?” he demanded, practically spitting the ‘you’.

“I’m here to find who killed Ricky Valentine,” I replied.

“Get out!” he demanded.

“Look, if we work together, we have a much better chance of quickly finding out....” Which is as far as I got before he moved across the intervening space, grabbed me by the front of my trenchcoat, and slung me through the front wall of the building. Along with a shower of bricks and other miscellaneous building materials, I crashed into the parking lot. I would be aching tomorrow morning but just now I was more annoyed than injured. My armor was proof against a great deal more than simple walls. As the crime scene guys and the local cops who had gathered outside backed away, I stood up and with a flick of the casting dagger in my right hand cast a simple cleaning spell.

However, the angel wasn’t done yet.

“Who are you?” I asked, wondering which chorus he belonged to. At the moment he was acting like a member of the battle cadre of the archangel Michael’s host.

“I am Variesien of Gabriel’s hunters,” he declared, storming out of the hole he’d just made. “Prepare to face Judgement.”

From my coat pocket, I pulled my flask of salt and undid the stopper. A white mound began growing next to my foot. "Shouldn't you be trying to find out who killed Ricky instead of wasting your time with me?" Charli watched from the hole in the wall, mouth agape.

"You are worth a little extra effort, and that's assuming you didn't kill him yourself," he stated.

"Whatever you say," I replied. I couldn't really go toe-to-toe with him and I certainly couldn't outrun him. But I did have a plan. I hoped it was a good one because I had yet to come up with a backup plan that didn't involve Variesien beating me into a gooey paste. With a wave of my left hand I bound his wings with a band of hellfire. Angels do *not* like having their wings bound. With a yell he reached behind him and began tearing at the fiery band. This was actually a distraction.

With my right hand I momentarily altered the consistency of the ground he stood upon. During that moment he sank up to his waist before I allowed the ground to snap back to its normal form. A normal human would be trapped for hours. And that was assuming they had help getting themselves out. The angel would be stuck for only a moment. Just now he was obviously trying to decide which was the greater inconvenience, the band on his wings or being stuck up to his waist in parking lot.

Gesturing with both daggers, I spoke a quick spell. The salt next to me flew across the intervening space and formed a circle around the angel. I then spoke another quick spell powering the circle. A circle of protection. Moving the blades as though working my way through a martial arts kata, I began casting another spell while the puzzled angel looked on in a mixture of fascination and disgust. Another ring of salt separated and moved a few inches outside the first band, forming concentric rings around the now bemused angel. More of the salt flew over forming letters... then words and symbols of power. And as the protective circle suddenly reversed itself into a binding circle, his look turned to one of shocked disbelief. He tested the bounds of the circle with a hand which rebounded from the invisible force powering the circle. The angel then struck the circle hard... to no avail. He was trapped. At least for the next few minutes. If I didn't complete the spell, the weavings of power would have no internal support and would fall apart.

But the spell was good only so long as the salt remained formed into an unbroken circle. And I suspected that any number of the cops or bystanders would be more than happy to free the angel once my back was turned. Moving again in what most probably looked like another dance or kata to those folks looking on, I began casting another spell. This one was a powerful warding around the containment circle. The warding would disorient anyone approaching the circle and turn them away from the circle at the center.

"How long?" the angel asked with a mighty frown.

"I wish you would have simply agreed to work with me," I stated with a frown of my own. "Or at the very least not attacked me. Instead we do it the hard way. However, despite your obvious opinions, I'm not an evil man. I bind you until night falls across the circle or I am killed. Whichever comes first." And with that the binding spell completed with an audible snap. Variesien ripped the binding off his wings then pulled himself out of the parking lot he had been mired in. But he couldn't leave the circle until it was broken or one of the two conditions I'd stated came true.

Personally, I was hoping for the night fall option.

Still frowning, the angel crossed his arms and sat down on the rubble from the parking lot to wait.

This gave me roughly six hours in which to operate before he was once again freed. Not much time to find the killer. Turning away from him, I strode across the parking lot and through

where the front doors had been. Once inside, Charli followed me in at a discreet distance.

Something caught my attention so I diverted my path a bit, stopping at the taped outline where Ricky had fallen. The room still smelled of brimstone. But there was something else. Some additional residue of evil. “Was Ricky burned around the area of his wounds?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Charli replied, “I haven’t gotten a chance to examine the body yet so I don’t know if it came from one of the curses or from the shooter being very close to him.”

“I think the brimstone also had powdered hellfire mixed with it,” I told her, feeling sure I was right as I heard my own spoken words.

“Maybe, maybe not. I can’t believe you bound an angel,” she said quietly before snatching up her wand from the floor where she’d dropped it earlier.

“Seemed like a better solution than being rendered unto goo,” I replied absently as I walked past the outline and over to where the stray piece of enchanted steel had been imbedded into the wall.

“If you weren’t damned before, you surely are now.”

“You don’t get damned for using non-lethal force against someone. Not without the circumstances being much worse than our little confrontation turned out to be.” It seemed likely that the buckshot would have been enchanted to be untraceable. At least it would if the hitter had been a professional. If not... then he was most likely already dead himself.

“And just how would you know that?” she demanded.

“Part of my training. I’ve been taught by experts. And I’ve studied up on this subject a great deal. This particular topic is near and dear to my heart.”

“So you truly are damned,” she said quietly. “Just like the rumors say.”

“Most likely. Now, I need your hair pins. They are silver... aren’t they?”

“What in the world do you need my hairpins for?” she asked, obviously puzzled.

“Hand them over and I’ll show you.”

“They’re enchanted,” she replied, not particularly eager to give them to me.

“That won’t matter,” I told her. “Please?”

“And if I won’t give them up?”

“I won’t force you. However, they’re for the only white spell I know for finding things. If you won’t give them to me, then I’ll go find an animal and cast one of the black spells I know for finding what needs be found.” She shuddered, then with obvious reluctance pulled them from her hair and handed them to me. Her auburn hair dropped down around her shoulders.

“Your hair looks better down anyway,” I replied, looking over the pins. One had a lockpicking charm on it and the other a single, quick release invisibility spell. Fairly short duration but probably good for purposes of escape. With a breath I blew the lesser enchantments away, leaving the pins once more simple silver hair pins. Upon seeing this, she muttered a few choice words.

“Watch,” I replied, pressing one pin against the wall next to the bullet hole. Speaking quickly, I cast an attunement spell so that the pins, which already looked like twins, became much more alike and on an entirely different level. Switching to an enchantment, I began speaking again. The pin against the wall slowly elongated and formed itself into a circle around the hole. With a gesture from my silver dagger, the circle of silver melded itself through the wall until it reached an depth equal to the center of the piece of darkly enchanted shot. There it stopped. My compass was now set to its own special magnetic north. The other pin would be the needle of my compass.

“One step back if you please,” I said with a wave of the silver dagger.

“Step back to where?” Charli asked.

“I should imagine back to the casing of the shell from which the shot came,” I replied, walking past her in the direction the pin now pointed. Out into the parking lot. Right to the crime scene van which was parked on the other side of the half a dozen police cars I’d walked past earlier.

The cops and others by the van mostly shrank away. By this time my warding had reached it’s full power and I was probably the only one who could see the angel watching me with a sullen, yet interested, gaze. “Officer?” I asked Charli as we came to a stop in front of the police van.

With a shrug and a frown, she opened the door to the van. The silver pin pointed straight at a cardboard box. She pulled it over and pulled up the box top. Reaching in, she picked up two plastic bags, each containing a spent shotgun shell.

“Wait a sec,” I said with a frown. “He was supposed to have used a sawed-off double-barrel. “Did he actually stop and reload?”

“And here I thought you already knew everything,” she said with some small satisfaction. “No. He emptied the gun while sprinting for the exit. Got it reloaded just in time to convince the guy at the door that diving for cover would be more in his interest than trying to intercept the shooter.”

“Shows skill... or at least coordination,” I muttered.

“Whatever,” she replied.

Focusing my attention on the shells again, I tapped my compass needle with the silver dagger. “Point me to the next step back.” The needle spun around in my open palm for a second before pointing deeper into the city.

“Is that going to lead us to the gun or to the person or creature who put the curses on the shot?” Charli asked.

“That’s a good question,” I replied with a frown. “Unfortunately, I don’t know. I *do* know we’re a good distance away from whatever it is. You have a car?”

“What’s the matter? Selling your soul not come with a company car?” she asked sweetly.

“No, that’s only in the movies,” I replied as drolly as I could manage with the pissed off angel staring at my back.

“Fine, that’s my car,” she said with a nod towards an expensive sports convertible a few cars down from the van.

“Nice,” I muttered, biting my tongue and not saying anything about how *her* selling her soul had obviously improved her lot in life. I needed her help if I was to get this quickly resolved. And with nightfall getting closer and closer, my continued good health required that this entire affair be concluded quickly.

With a finely tuned whine, her car surged into the street.

She’s got potential, a woman’s voice seemed to whisper into my ear. *Do you think she might join us?* I knew from long experience that Ariella wasn’t really there. Not physically at least.

I don’t know, I said silently. I wasn’t very good at psychic communication but as always, she seemed to hear me all the same.

She hasn’t actually sold her soul, you know. But I’m not sure just what deal she did make nor with whom she made it. While you’re about your business, try to find out. I get the feeling that this one’s going to be useful.

“Right,” I sighed aloud.

“What was that?” Charli asked. “Were you wanting me to turn?”

“No,” I sighed. “I was just talking to myself. I do that sometimes when faced with a servitor of one of the powers who wants me on the other side.”

We rode in silence for a while before I said, “There were three of us.”

“What? Back at the strip joint?”

“No. Much farther back. They were friends of mine. Good friends. We’d joined a cult. It was a quasi-religious thing that involved a lot of running around naked. Originally, we thought it would be a good way to get laid. And it was. But as time passed, we started really getting into it. There was a militant sect within the cult. These were the folks who protected the others from predators that came looking for vulnerable children and such.” Charli continued to drive but I could tell I held her attention most closely.

“One day we heard on the news that a convicted terrorist was being released in our area. He’d made a deal and had ratted on his fellow mass murderers. Still, it didn’t seem right that he should live free when he’d helped murder so many people. Anyway, a few days later we drove into town and spotted the guy. He was working for the town doing animal control work for the city.

“Later that night we got drunk. And while I was drunk I suggested that we should go kill him. I told the others that killing him would be doing God’s work. And I evidently convinced my friends of this. While I lay passed out, surrounded by empty beer cans, they went into town and beat the guy to death with baseball bats.” She made a moue of distaste.

“I read about that,” she said quietly.

“Yeah. It made the news alright. My friends each served ten years. Got out of jail two years before Gabriel’s appearance. Were both called to Judgement by his first trump.”

“And since you convinced them to kill in God’s name, you should have been called by his second trump,” she said, obviously understanding.

“Yeah,” I agreed with a sigh. “In between trumps, my employers showed up and made me an offer. They needed redeeming as much as I did. So we made a deal. My job is to show God what wonderful people we really are. Show him by helping others using the powers and teachings they’ve given me.”

“Why are you telling me this?” she asked.

“Because I need your help. I thought that maybe if you understood me a little better, you might be more willing to do what’s necessary to solve this murder.”

She threw me a number of sideways looks over the next several minutes of our drive but said nothing. The needle began turning and she began moving down side streets in order to follow where it pointed. “We’re getting close,” I told her. We were no longer in the good side of town either. Well, we’d never actually been in the good side of town. However, we had moved into the worst side of town.

Sometimes called the Dumps and sometimes the Six Oh Ones, this was the area where the police only came in force. The old town trash dump was here as were more than half a dozen large wrecking yards. Hence the Dumps moniker. Six Oh One came from the project number of the huge federal housing program located in the area. Made up of dozens of five story tall buildings that all basically looked the same, Six Oh One had been built from substandard materials, using substandard labor. They’d begun falling down before the last buildings had even been finished. Combined with tenants who couldn’t care less about the condition of their own homes, much less their neighborhood, the place had been a wound on the city since its inception. And that wound had festered badly over the years. As we pulled up, I suddenly realized that it was worse than I’d known.

“Stupid asshole angel,” I muttered fervently, getting out and walking to the sidewalk.

“What?” Charli asked, stepping out of the car more slowly.

“There’s some sort of demonic spirit nearby. Why couldn’t the angel have waited til we got here to have gone crazy?”

“I rather suspect it has something to do with that left-hand blade you have there,” she replied, holding her wand at the ready. She pulled a small leather bag out of her purse as well. Using the wand, she cast a complicated spell involving a lot of sorcery. After a minute, the car turned insubstantial. Immediately after, she opened the bag and with a gesture from the wand the car squeezed into it. Beat the hell out of the crappy alarm spell Lonzo had on his car. She tucked the bag back into her purse and gestured for me to lead the way.

With a scowl, I started walking towards the building the needle pointed to. Half a dozen poorly dressed young men who’d been lazing around watching us began perking up. By the time we’d reached the base of the steps leading into the building, four of them were holding guns, one of them a straight razor, and the last a wand.

“Where you think you’re goin’?” One of the thugs with a gun asked. They were a mixed race group. White, brown, and black. Turning my attention back to my hand, the needle pointed into the building. I felt sure the demonic presence was inside as well. It didn’t feel like a full blown demon. Maybe someone possessed but there were other possibilities as well. With a scowl, I dropped the needle into a pocket.

“He axed you a question!” another thug informed me loudly.

“I know,” I replied with a wicked grin. “Since I walked up to the steps of this building, I think it’s pretty clear where I’m going.”

“Not inside you’re not,” the first guy declared.

I stuck my hands into and through my coat pockets. They began exhorting me to slowly and carefully pull my hands out of my pockets. They didn’t realize until it was too late that their big mistake had been letting me get my hands into my pockets in the first place.

“You alright?” I asked as Charli threw up over the side of the steps.

“Oh, I’m just ducky,” she replied after a moment.

“I take it you’ve never seen someone turned inside out before?”

“No! God, I’m never going to sleep without nightmares of this again,” she said, turning back to me and deliberately not meeting my eyes.

“You’ll sleep much better than you would have if that spell had hit you,” I informed her as I dispelled a most unpleasant curse from the front doors.

“What was it?” she asked. “I was busy trying to keep you from being shot to hell. From the looks of your coat, I was only partly successful. You must be wearing some really kick body armor.”

“Yeah. My armor’s good, no doubt about it,” I agreed, opening the doors. “However, I have to replace the coat all too frequently. Hopefully my customer will cover the cost of this one. He was projecting a powerful compliance spell at you. That’s a nasty, will robbing spell to cast on anyone. In this part of town, it would pretty much guarantee hell on earth for the rest of your all-too-long life.” She shuddered at this.

“Suddenly, seeing him turned inside out doesn’t seem so bad,” she muttered as I stepped inside the run down building.

“My thoughts exactly,” I told her as I pulled the needle back out of my pocket. In here, the sense of the demonic presence was everywhere. However, the needle pointed up. “By the way,” I told her starting up the stairs, “Thanks for taking down the fellow with the scorpion. Nasty little machine pistol that. Not many people bother enchanting their weapons when magic bullets are so

readily available.”

“Yeah. No problem.”

“So,” I began, keeping a watchful eye all around as we slowly climbed the stairs. “How’d you get hired on with the city? Didn’t I hear that you were originally from Kansas or somewhere like that?”

“I have no idea what you heard,” she said with a frown in her voice. “I’m actually from Missouri. A friend told me the city was in need of a sorceress. At the time, I had been looking for a good job and a place to call home. Got the good job. Still not sure about the home part.”

“It must be nice to have connected friends. Terrestrially connected, I mean,” I told her, lowering the volume of my voice as we continued up the stairs.

“Yeah, it was. She died in the big mass media exorcism two years ago. Who would have thought that so many top media execs would turn out to be demons?”

“Actually, I wasn’t a bit surprised. And no, I didn’t have any warning from my special sources. It’s just that as much as the press hated America, God, democracy, and anyone who didn’t worship at the alter of global warming, I had begun suspecting some time ago that there were demonic influences involved. Influences going way back to when three out of four of the major television networks in the U.S. actually worked for the DNC.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “I remember those days. Back before the Iranians smuggled their dirty bomb across the Mexican border and irradiated the Republican’s convention. I was just a little girl then. My father was so incredibly disgusted with the people cheering in the streets of Seattle and Damascus. It was the first time I’d ever heard him cuss.”

“Bad times,” I agreed.

“All the way to the top?” she asked in a barely audible voice.

“Looks like,” I replied in an equally quiet voice.

“Have you noticed that there don’t seem to be any living people actually inside the building?” she asked.

“Yeah, I noticed. Can’t say I’m surprised though.”

Eventually, we arrived at the top of the stairs. We took a moment to rest on the small landing and I took the opportunity to study the door. Or rather the spells on the door.

The spells on it were mostly there to stabilize the door. Which suggested it wasn’t an ordinary door. Perhaps it had been taken from someone’s dream. Or nightmare. Either way, I didn’t trust it to remain a normal door.

“What do you make of the door?” I asked quietly. Charli was smart. Maybe she’d come up with something I’d missed.

“Looks like a stabilized rift point,” she replied after a long, thoughtful couple of minutes.

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking. See the ripple down at the lower edge? I’m suspecting that might be a tear-away pin. The means by which someone could quickly and easily tear this doorway out of this world for good.”

“Hey!” she said excitedly, “If we could pull that pin now, our problem would be solved. The entity would be trapped in whatever dimension or world it’s currently inhabiting.”

“It’s not going to be that easy,” I replied, still examining the doorway and the area around it.

“Oh?! And why not?” she challenged.

“Because it never is,” I sighed. “Easy and me just don’t get along. Nothing in my life is easy. Nothing.”

“Are you talking about some curse or just bad luck?” she asked, with a scowl. “Or one and

the same?"

"Not that I know of," I explained, still trying to figure out a way through the door that didn't involve being trapped on the other side. "Things just do not work out the easy way around me. Speaking of which, I think I know how to keep the doorway from being severed."

"And that would be?"

"You're going to have to stay in the doorway. The release spell shouldn't work so long as the doorway spell is engaged. Look how they're tangled up there. If one fires without the other being cleared, the spells will tear. Probably tear badly enough to form a temporary bridge between here and wherever this goes."

"And why don't I go through while you hold the doorway?" she demanded.

"Because I'm the agent and your jurisdiction is strictly local," I replied simply. This statement met with an interesting and creative series of expletives. Eventually, she wound down. "Alright. I'll hold it open. I've got a few bolstering spells that I think will help hold it in place."

"Thank you," I told her, walking over to the enchanted door. Putting a hand on the knob, I turned and asked, "Wish me luck?"

"Brice Ward," she said with a frown. "I've never much cared for you. However, I'm starting to suspect that some of that was a rush to judgement. Not all of it to be sure. But you've shown a sense of responsibility that I would not have expected from a man with your reputation. Good luck. Try to come back in one piece. Body and soul."

"Thank you." Taking a deep breath, I turned and opened the door.

"Welcome, welcome," the old man greeted me as I stepped into a cluttered candy shop, apparently having walked in through the back door. The edges of the room were dusty as was much of his stock. Was he the demonic entity I'd sensed? Moving slowly towards him, I couldn't tell with any certainty. The whole area seemed to have an evil presence radiating off it. And it certainly wasn't what I'd been halfway expecting.

"This is my shop," the pudgy, balding fellow explained with a smile. "I sell dreams here. Destinies. Your fondest wish can come true now that you're here!"

"I doubt that," I replied absently with a smirk as I continued to study the shop. I appeared to be the only one here other than the old man. The front windows looked out on a busy street but not one I recognized.

"No, no. I assure you it's true," he said, sounding sincere. "Of course there's a price to pay. But the price for your dreams coming true is small compared with what you get!"

"Really?" I asked, still not having found anyone else around inside the small store. "And what would it cost me to get some hellfire and brimstone shotgun shells made? Ones with an individual curse on each piece of buckshot?"

"Ahh," he said with a smile. "But you don't want the shells... only who bought them."

"Who made them might be nice too," I agreed, focusing my attention on the man since I couldn't find anyone else around.

He looked me over a moment before saying with a greasy smile, "I think what you really want is immortality. Shotgun shells are only part of a means to an end for you. Wouldn't you rather be immortal? Never have to worry about dying... or the consequences that come with dying? Neither Heaven nor Hell would have a claim to you then. You could go back to doing what you want with

your life. No more worrying about making anyone other than yourself happy.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ve heard this all before. Still not interested.”

“Of course you are Linewalker” he countered smoothly. “If you were immortal, you wouldn’t have to worry about toeing the line for your ‘friends’. Hell would lose interest in you the same as Heaven would. You could do what you wanted. Wouldn’t have to worry about being dragged to hell by either side. Heck, if you weren’t siding with the Greys, the divine crowd just might leave you alone entirely. After all, you’re just one lost soul in a sea.”

“And eternal youth would be a little option I could purchase on the side, I assume?”

“The extras do cost extra,” he agreed with a smile that used car salesmen everywhere would kill for.

“Tell me about the one who bought the shells,” I told him with a frown.

“Like everything else in life, that’ll cost you,” he said with a self-satisfied smile.

“What?” I asked warily, still keeping an eye out for any signs of additional trouble.

“A piece of your soul would be the quickest and easiest payment. You’d never miss it and it would eventually regrow anyway.” By the time he finished speaking I was shaking my head.

“Let me make you a counter-offer,” I said, beginning to become angry. “How about I not level your store?”

This statement resulted in a huge belly laugh from the fellow. When he finally settled enough to talk, his eyes had become a glowing orange, as though fires burned somewhere behind them. “I think you need to take another look around,” he said, still chuckling but with a definite edge of malice to it now. “You’re not in your world anymore. You’re in Purgatory. Where angels and demons roam the street trying to convince the undecided. And you can be sure that no angel will come help you. But guess what?” he asked, his voice turning unpleasant. “All I have to do is yell and there’ll be half a dozen of the damned in here before you can say ‘oh hell’.”

Throwing him a quick frown, I walked out the front door and looked up and down the street. In the distance to the left, I could see some dramatic changes in the buildings. Compared to the ones where this shop was, those buildings were smaller, older, and more gothic. To the right the building started off the same as I was used to. However, on the other side of a massive park, I could see some very futuristic buildings. And in both directions lost people traveled by various means.

On foot, on horses, in cars and carriages and other devices I’d never seen before they moved. A few people flew; some apparently without aid even. And to my eyes, demons and angels traveled freely amongst them.

Dammit, looked like he’d chosen to tell the truth about where we were.

Down the magical thread linking me to the two casting blades, I sent the command, ‘acclimate.’ Tiny pulses of magic began coming from the two blades. How long it would take them to adjust to this new world was unknown to me. On my first and only trip into the Magic Lands, it had taken each of the blades days to adjust.

“What are you doing?!” the shopkeeper hissed, having followed me out the door.

“A big demon like you isn’t worried about what a little agent like me is doing... are you?”

“Ah! Beregor!” he called loudly with smug satisfaction, speaking to a big, well dressed, sword-wielding demon across the street. “You’re just the person I wanted to have a word with.” With a frown the demon began crossing the street to us.

“Hmm... Beregor,” I said quietly to the fat demon beside me. “He looks competent. Dangerous...” I waited a couple of heartbeats before adding, “...Expensive.” The shopkeeper wasn’t able to keep the frown off his face.

“What?” the stylish demon demanded, having reached a space a mere five feet from us. “What do you want Albiancus?” Not a true name but it could potentially be used as a lever nonetheless.

“I wanted to do you the favor of introducing you to an agent of the grey angels,” the fat demon replied greasily. “They are rare... and becoming more so by the day. I thought you might want to meet one in the flesh while the opportunity remained.”

“Really?” the large demon asked, turning two red eyes upon me.

“Yep,” I agreed, not wanting to get into a lying contest with the demons yet. “Got the coat, as you can see, but the decoder ring keeps getting lost in the mail.”

He laughed, obviously amused. “Why are you here? And in the flesh no less?”

“Albiancus is interfering in my world,” I explained, earning a hiss from the balding demon. “He’s providing demonic weapons to very amateurish, sloppy people. I was hoping to find the answers I needed before more of the divine host arrives.”

“What divine host?” Beregor snapped, suddenly worried and angry.

“Gabriel’s Hunters showed up on the scene of the latest crime while I was investigating. To be honest, in my world I’m better than them. Being an agent of the grey’s, I have to be. That’s why I’m here before anyone else. However, even though I am better, they are quite good at their jobs as I’m sure you know. They *will* find their way here. And my lead time on them declines with every passing moment. If I don’t get the answers I need and get back to the world, you can most likely expect one of Michael’s battle cadres next. And I don’t think any of us wants that.” So there’d only been one of the Hunters. It was close enough that it still rang true.

“Lies!” the fat demon roared, punching me in the side just beneath my arm. I flew through the air, hit a tree and was flipped around into some of the passers by, where a number of them joined me in falling to the ground.

Groaning, I sat up amongst the downed people who didn’t seem particularly happy to have been flattened by me. Rubbing my neck, I called out, “Only the truth can cause that strong a reaction, heh Beregor?”

“It’s nothing my good friend, nothing!” the fat demon hastily explained as the other demon picked him up with one hand.

“Explain how an angelic battle cadre showing up here is nothing!” the big demon growled.

“It’ll never happen! I have the doorway set to fold in upon itself if someone really powerful tries to come in through it. It’ll dump them into Limbo. We’re safe here. Business as usual.” Beregor began lowering the fellow back to the ground.

“He’s right,” I agreed, loudly. Standing up, I began walking around those I’d knocked down to get closer to the two of them. Albiancus looked relieved for half a second before a look of deep suspicion took over his face. “It *is* rigged to collapse. However, I locked it open from the other side.” Seeing the fat demon’s disbelief, I asked, “What? You think I’d just walk through an inter-dimensional doorway and not make sure it’s gonna still be there once I’ve got what I came for?” Focusing my attention once more upon the big demon, I smirked, “As I said, clumsy and amateurish.” The big demon’s eyes turned back to the slimy demon.

“He doesn’t have the power to do that!” the fat said derisively, trying not to sweat.

My smile turned ugly as I pulled both of my casting blades from my pockets. “Once more you underestimate the opposition. Seems to be a habit. And your incompetence is going to cost those demonic assets in the vicinity dearly if your initial screw up is not rectified.” Even as I finished speaking, I became aware of a tingling running up my arms from each of the daggers. They were

already attuned. And something happened that rarely occurred, they both wanted the same thing: dead demons. Dozens of spells flitted through my mind as each of the weapons suggested useful and dangerous spells to me. The blade in my right hand began glowing a brilliant white while the other burst into flames and hellfire dripped to the sidewalk. Both blades were stronger here than they were on earth. Much stronger.

“Where the hell did you get that?!” the fat demon screeched even as the other demon dropped him and raised an arm to shield his eyes.

“My employers, of course,” I replied with a smirk. “Tell me what I want to know and I’ll leave. However, I’m through asking. Answer now or I’ll start carving answers out of you... assuming that your neighbors don’t do it for me.”

“Fine,” the balding demon snapped. “I sold them to a demonologist by the name of Scott Cody. He goes by the street name Flame. Now go away and seal the damned door behind you.”

With a little flick of my left wrist, a small portion of the fat demon separated away from his arm accompanied by a shriek of pain from the same source. This blood-dripping part of the demon carried his memories of the transaction in question. While keeping one eye on the demons, I spun out a number of spells into the floating chunk of demon. When last was done, the piece of meat and skin stretched and thinned. A moment later the surface of this sheet of demon showed the transaction in question. But it also showed a lot more than what he’d told me.

Beregor turned a disgusted look on the demon next to him. “You’re even more stupid than the human let on.” And with that he stuck his sword through the balding demon. With a scream and a blast of hellfire, the fat demon disappeared. Turning to me, the big, stylish demon asked, “I take it that you’ll be leaving and further that you’ll be closing that door behind you?”

“Oh yes,” I agreed. “It appears I have more work than I’d expected ahead of me.”

“Well, good luck,” he said with an evil grin. “Do your best to screw up their plans. If you need help, give me a call. I might even answer you.”

“You enjoy messing up other demon’s plans that much?” I asked, walking to the door of the shop.

“Oh, I most certainly do,” he declared, still smiling unpleasantly as he turned and began moving once more down the street.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I told his departing back just before stepping into the shop. Not that I had any intention of ever calling him.

Walking across the shop, it suddenly occurred to me that all the goods in here no longer had an owner. While I was indeed quite pressed for time, this was an opportunity that didn’t come along very often. The stuff on the shelves was crap meant to draw the eye and bring in the exceptionally foolish. The fact that it was all enchanted to look like candy only made it worse. Ignoring the junk, I quickly walked behind the counter. There were almost a dozen variously sized, shaped, and styled boxes. Since I was in a hurry, I grabbed them all and stuck them in various pockets around my person. The long, slim box, I tucked into my belt. That done, I ran to the back and through the door.

My senses reeled and with a lurch I literally fell back into the world. For a moment I lay sprawled across the floor. Sitting up, I found Charli sitting next to the now normal door. She was covered in sweat and breathing heavily. “You okay?” she rasped.

“Yeah,” I replied, standing up. “What happened to you?”

“Someone was trying to close the door. Trying hard.” She turned a tired but satisfied smile upon me, “But I wouldn’t let them.”

“Thank you,” I told her, helping her to her wobbly feet. “Thank you very much. And it was

worth it. I got the information we needed.”

“Good, I’d hate to think all that effort was wasted. Who was it?”

“It’s complicated,” I replied with an inward frown. “A demonologist by the name of Scott Cody is being used by one of Mephistopheles’ people. That one’s using a liars token so we’ll have to make some preparations before we meet him.”

“Oh, that’s interesting,” she muttered. “But what’s that got to do with the now publicly dead and lamented Ricky Valentine?”

“The demonologist was told killing Ricky was a prerequisite for gaining various demonic powers. The rub is that they don’t give a imp’s fart about this Scott fellow. They just wanted Ricky dead because he was an agent of the divine. That’s where the other demon comes in.”

“Another demon?” she asked with a sigh, which told me more than her physical mannerisms just how very tired she was.

“Yes,” I responded, working a quick restorative spell on her with my right hand. “I’m not sure who this one answers to. However, he acquired a potion of twisted resurrection while in Purgatory. From what I could pick up, I think he’s planning on using it to reanimate Ricky’s corpse. The thought being that since this abomination was once touched by the divine, it will be immune to divine powers.”

“Thus giving them an unkillable symbol of power and probably a deadly killing machine on top of that,” she muttered, standing up straighter as my spell took effect.

“Something like that,” I agreed.

The door beside us opened up showing a nice apartment. Standing in the real-world doorway was a demon shaped like a man. “Great plan, isn’t it?” he asked with a grin.

It would appear that the demonic entity I’d sensed in the building hadn’t been the gateway to Purgatory as I’d been vaguely thinking.

I managed to pull both casting blades just as his blast of hellfire caught me in the chest and propelled me down the top flight of stairs. Slamming into the wall, the breath whooshed out of me and I dropped face first into the landing. Oh, that hurt. A lot. Fighting a full fledged demon here probably wasn’t going to work much better than fighting the angel would have.

What I needed to do was take away his reason for being here. Spinning out blessings and bolstering spells to hopefully keep Charli alive, I used the other blade to begin searching for any inherently magical items nearby. It found mine and Charli’s quickly. And a moment later it found one more.

“What’s going on down there?” the demon demanded from out of my sight. Charli became momentarily visible as she went sailing through the air across the hallway before continuing on out of sight. From the thumping noise, it sounded like she crashed into something. The demon stepped around the corner, now plainly visible at the top of the stairs. With a grin, I began throwing power bolts from both blades. Moving more nimbly than any human, he dodged the blasts even as the wall behind him was pulverized.

“Not good enough little sorcerer,” he said with a nasty grin as he prepared another blast of hellfire.

“Yeah,” I agreed, “I’m a lousy shot.”

He stopped and frowned at me. “Yes you are. So why are you smiling?”

“That’s easy,” I replied, still grinning. “Because while you were busy saving your own ass, you allowed your potion of twisted regeneration to get blown to smithereens. Too bad, no super undead for you today.”

“Noooo!” he screamed, turning to look into the devastation behind him to see if it was true. With a leap bolstered by a quick spell, I landed next to him and sprinted down the hall towards Charli. Just because his plot was ruined didn’t mean he’d be leaving our plane of existence peacefully. Skidding to the floor beside the injured woman, it was plain to see that the sorceress cop had seen better days. The fact that she was still smoldering was my first clue to this. Her broken nose and arm I also took into account. Damn. And the monster who’d just done this to her was now running towards us with blood in his eyes.

My right hand began spinning out protection spells as I knelt down over the unconscious woman. With my left, some of the spells that had been flitting through my head earlier came blasting out. Even as a glowing blue, protective force bubble formed around us, bands of black smoke turned to steel around the demon’s legs, causing him to trip. This was followed by dozens of dots of gold light that seemed to cause him intense pain as well as a couple of spells that tried and failed to blast his body into pieces. Dripping blood, the demon stood and kicked away the black bands. In Purgatory, those spells would have been much more effective. Not that this helped me in the least. Desperate, I pulled out one of the boxes. My magic seeking spell had informed me what a couple of the items were.

With my right hand I continued spinning a more powerful protection spell as I opened the box with my left hand. Inside was a pineapple hand grenade. But not just any grenade. Oh no. This was an unholy grenade. Using both blades, I flicked quick spells at the demon to slow him down. As one of them put a hole in the floor where he’d been about to step, this worked. Long enough for me to pull the pin on the grenade, roll it towards the demon, and then throw myself over Charli.

I awoke in my bed with the worst hangover I could remember ever having. And that was saying something. Blinking fuzzily at the intense light, I sat up.

Next time I woke up, the lights seemed to be a much more normal brightness. Ooching my way back against my pillow and headboard, I slowly and clumsily worked my way into a sitting position. Since my head had yet to explode, I took this to be a sign that things were better.

When I finally realized that Ariella was sitting on the edge of my bed, I began to understand that I still wasn’t at the top of my game. “It lives,” she said by way of greeting. “Which all things being equal, is something of a surprise.

“No need for you to speak aloud,” she continued. “We’ve been nosing around and learned what happened. You took an assignment, which we all felt by the way. You then cleverly trapped a rather stupid angel, made a trip to Purgatory, got a demon killed - good work with that too, robbed his shop, returned to this world, foiled a plot to turn the beloved Ricky Valentine into a super zombie, and then blew off the top floor of the worst apartment building in the city, killing another demon in the process, while at the same time trying to protect the human woman I mentioned as being a potential agent of ours.

“Would you agree this is pretty much what happened?” she finished with an expectant look on her face.

“Umm... yes,” I thought in her general direction. She smiled.

“Okay, very good. One demon kill and another kill by proxy in your favor as well as one selfless act when you threw yourself over the girl. Excellent.”

“So where does that put us... in the big picture?” I silently asked.

“I have no idea,” she replied cheerfully. “However, it can’t have hurt our chances. Now, switching topics, there has been some collateral damage. The building you blew the top off collapsed, causing property values to immediately go up. The angel decided not to hunt you down when he was finally freed. Instead, we whispered the name of the demonologist to him. He tracked the fellow down and there was apparently a great deal of evidence against him. Smote the fellow down right there on the spot.”

“Now that’s my kind of collateral damage,” I thought to her with a grin.

“Very much so,” she agreed. “However, there is a bit more damage, which you’ll find out more about in good time. We’re working on repairing it now. Until we’re finished, you might notice a minor change here and there.”

“Minor change?” I asked silently. “Like what?”

“Oh, you’ll see,” she replied before disappearing in a flash of blue light.

Not wanting to think on it further, I slid down back into bed and was almost instantly asleep.

Some time later, I woke up feeling much better. On my way to the bathroom, I summoned my coffee cup to me which came flying around the corner. I managed to catch it on the first pass which I thought was a pretty good sign. Conjuring some coffee into it came just as easily as before and tasted just as bad. But it was strong coffee which is what truly counted.

After walking to the mirror, I was only distantly aware of the cup sliding out of my numbed fingers. I was slightly more aware when it landed on my toes and spilt hot coffee all over my foot but only marginally so.

Staring back at me from the mirror was Charli Rhodes’ face.