

The Demon Deception


Saint and Succubus

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Prolog

Afghanistan.

Hartman heard a whisper. It was hardly noticeable at first. It was at the edge of her hearing. It sounded almost silly, like a child making a pretend whisper, or someone calling a cat. She glanced over her shoulder in the direction of the sound. As she looked, she heard another whisper in a different direction. She whipped her head around to see. It was too dark, though.

Whatever was out there, was beyond her vision. Another whisper sounded, in a different direction. The whispers came from at least three different directions, maybe four. She was surrounded. Whatever it was seemed to be toying with her. She wanted to yell, maybe throw something. In this area though, that didn't seem like a very good idea, not with the Taliban out there somewhere.

The feeling hit her with an intensity she couldn't have imagined. She gasped as it made its presence known. She couldn't see it, or what it was, but she knew it was there. She knew now that she was being hunted. She felt a chill. The hair on her body stood up. It was more than physical cold. This wasn't her body reacting to a drop in temperature. It was something else completely. She felt a dread engulf her. She began to shake. In the back of her mind, she felt a horror growing. She was being stalked. Whatever it was, though, was *different*. It wasn't human.

She felt a malevolence, and that malevolence made her gasp from the force of the hatred directed at her. That entity didn't just want to kill her, it wanted to

destroy her. It wanted to rend her body, and shred her mind. It was something completely outside her experience. It wasn't just a hunger for her death, it wanted to revel in her utter and complete destruction.

Not even an hour had gone past since her world had shattered. The day had started well for Specialist Susan Hartman. An IED had changed all of that. It had exploded, flipping the Humvee she was riding in, and in the confusion of the moment, she had been left behind at the scene of the complex ambush.

Her convoy had delivered much needed supplies to a remote forward operating base. They had been headed back to Highway 1, or as the soldiers called it, Ring Road. At the Ring Road, they would turn north, and head back to Bagram Air Force Base. Her logistics unit was supported by four infantry Humvees, two in front of the logistics convoy, and two behind. She had been excited to take her first trip outside the wire. That was then. Now she just prayed that she would live to see the morning sun, and her unit again.

Some of her memories of that night were jumbled, or completely gone. Concussions did that to you. What she saw, though, was a picture that would always stay with her. It was a line in the dirt. It was not unexpected to see lines in the dirt in Afghanistan. What made this line unusual was that it was straight. Straight lines don't occur naturally. She twisted to tell SSG Alciannas, her supervisor and the leader of her logistic convoy. Before she could tell him, her world became one of confusion, noise and pain.

The Humvee was on a curve on the road when the IED exploded. The force of the IED, plus the velocity around the curve caused the Humvee to flip. Hartman's first instinct was to complete her turn and grip Peltier, the gunner, around the waist, pulling him down, an action instilled in her during immediate action drill training. He was gripping the edge of the gunners hatch, and with her help, he was able to get back inside the Humvee. His head cleared the roof, and the Humvee completed its flip.

The Humvee landed hard, and slid to a stop. The force of the impact mangled the machinegun mounted on top. Peltier wasn't strapped in, but Hartman was, so she held on for dear life. The force of the impact as the Humvee flipped onto its roof tore him from her grasp. Her head smacked against the roof of the Humvee, hard. She was already concussed by the explosion, and the additional head trauma, even though she had on her helmet, didn't help.

Green tracers lit the night, a holdover of Soviet Block ammunition. US forces used red tracers, and even in SPC Hartman's condition, she realized that the enemy was shooting at them. The door frame was warped, her door torn open by the stress of the explosion, and the impact as the Humvee hit the ground. Something hit the door in front of her and pinged. Another one hit. She was confused, then realized that bullets were hitting, and she was exposed. She felt something behind her, and she couldn't get back into the wrecked vehicle. She didn't realize it was Peltier. She was afraid she was going to get hit. She had to move, and couldn't go backward. Her only option was forward. She saw a depression in front of her, and crawled away from the cover of the Humvee.

She was scared by the muzzle flashes. Her hearing began to come back, and she could hear the sound of bullets pinging on rock and metal. The dirt of the road sloped down as she crawled. A ditch opened up in front of her, running alongside

the road. She crawled forward and fell into it. A heavy stream of cold water flowed in the bottom, soaking her uniform. The impact of bullets on the Humvee armor screamed away into the night as ricochets.

She knew she wasn't safe. She saw heavy rocks in the ditch in front of her. She crawled behind them. She pulled in her legs to get as much of her body behind the cover of the rocks as she could. She suddenly remembered that she had left her rifle in the Humvee. She panicked. You never let your rifle out of arm's length. That was something that had been drilled into her ever since basic training. She couldn't crawl back and get it, though, not with the bullets hitting around the wreckage.

On the road, her crew and the wrecked Humvee were taking heavy fire. Gunners from the other convoy vehicles were shooting at the muzzle flashes. One of the Infantry Humvees roared up to the side, shielding the wreckage from the Taliban gunners. The infantry gunner on top engaged the Taliban shooters, brass tinkling as it ejected from the machinegun and hit the top of the Humvee.

The vehicle commander and the soldier in back jumped out, and pulled wounded soldiers out of the wreckage. They piled wounded bodies into their Humvee, and when they had everybody out, the vehicle commander yelled, "Go, Go." The Humvee raced out of the danger zone. They didn't notice that they had missed Hartman. They would race another five miles to a rally point before they counted soldiers, and noticed that she was missing.

The night grew still after the convoy speed away. The Taliban used the time to run away before the helicopters with their infrared cameras could arrive to kill them. She stayed in the ditch until she felt confident that there was nobody out there. A few minutes of silence seemed to stretch forever before she felt comfortable to climb out of the ditch. She went back to the Humvee to find her rifle. She felt the heat of the engine from the wreckage, and used it to warm her hands. She looked for her rifle, and found one, but it was bent from the accident. She found another that seemed to be okay. It felt like it was undamaged. She just hoped it would fire without exploding if she tried to shoot it. She didn't have many options at that point, though.

She didn't know if she should leave the wreckage. If she stayed with the Humvee, she was afraid that the Taliban would come back, search it, and find her. If she left the Humvee, she was afraid that the convoy would come back and not be able to find her. Everything was confusing. There was a loud ringing in her ears. She knew she wasn't thinking straight. It was very hard for her to concentrate.

She feared getting lost, but she feared the Taliban even more. She knew what would happen if they caught her. Her head jerked as she heard gravel slide in the distance. She thought the Taliban might still be out there. That gave her incentive, and she made up her mind to leave the wreckage. She would try to stay on the road in the dark, and pray she wouldn't meet anybody. She stood, swayed momentarily, and then leaned against the wreckage until her lightheadedness went away. She started walking, hoping that she was walking in the right direction, towards Highway 1.

It was cold. She was shivering again. She held her rifle at low ready. It was hard to walk, and hard to concentrate. She knew that if she stopped, she might never

get back up, not with a concussion and as cold as she was. She concentrated on the next step. One step wasn't so hard. She could concentrate on one step. One step became two, then two became three. She didn't think about that though. It was just one step, one step at a time.

Soon, she had some distance between her and the wreckage. It was cold, but her body heat was starting to dry her uniform. She was still shivering, but not as badly as before. She could see the road stretching out in front of her. It was a lighter strip of land than the ground on either side. Afghanistan could be beautiful at night. The stars were bright in the sky, making the lighter road visible.

There was no light pollution in Afghanistan at night until you got closer to the larger cities and military bases. In the country there were no lights at all. Here, she could see the infinite stars of the Milky Way. The stars were brighter, and much more beautiful than they were at home. Illuminated by starlight, the road stretched out before her.

What she didn't know, and what she hadn't seen, was that the road where her Humvee had flipped, was a y intersection. The arm of the y that the convoy had raced down, and the arm that she wanted, was to the right. Hiding in the ditch, behind the rocks, she didn't see this. When she began walking, she was on the left side of the wreckage, and never saw the other arm of the road that went in the other direction. She didn't know that the road branched at that point. She walked down the left side of the y. She was walking in the wrong direction, away from Highway 1.

She was okay at first, even though she was cold. She had her rifle, and she thought she was on the road to Highway 1. She felt edgy, though. At first she thought, maybe it was the concussion. Soon, though, her nervousness increased. She thought that something was watching her. She didn't think it was Taliban. Whatever it was, it moved too quietly. Her agitation faded in and out. She thought it was her imagination. She heard a rock rattle, and the anxiety came back. She walked further. She didn't hear anything else. The sounds were gone, but the impression was still there. Again, she thought it might be her imagination. She heard gravel crunch. She gasped and looked in the direction of the sound.

Then she heard the whistling. She felt the alien presence that was hunting her. She felt the alien, malevolent entity. She prayed to God that she would live through the night. She walked on, ten minutes, fifteen minutes. It was still out there. Another presence unmasked itself. The intensity of the hatred increased tenfold. She stumbled. A third presence unmasked, and the pain she felt increased a hundred fold. She heard a hideous moan. She was surprised to find the sound was coming from her.

She was going to die on a nameless road, in a nameless place. Nobody would find her. Whatever it was, it was going to destroy her. There was nothing she could do about it. Despair filled her mind, overwhelmed her soul. Her body failed her. She couldn't walk anymore. She was no longer interested in taking that one more step. Her hands opened, and the rifle fell from her grasp. She stumbled and fell to her knees. She folded her arms around her body, and rocked back and forth. The horror grew. It felt like a buzzing inside of her skull.

There were three of them. They walked forward, but only to the point that she could just make out their figures under the bright stars, taunting her with their

presence. They were abnormally tall and thin. Wraith like figures, emaciated, desiccated, they walked around her, circling her. They were naked in the cold. They weren't human. Their genitalia were shriveled. She couldn't tell if they were male or female.

She couldn't see their faces, though she knew that she didn't want to see that horror. Their hands stretched forth. The fingers were thin, and incredibly long. They reached for her. She knew, as soon as those fingers touched her, she was doomed. Tears rolled down her face in sheets. Heartrending sobs filled the air. Her head dropped to stare at the dirt in front of her.

"I think you've got yourself into a bit of trouble here, young lady."

The voice was clear and masculine. She couldn't look up, though. She was too tired. Her chest heaved as she cried. She wanted to lay down and sleep. She just wanted everything to be back to normal. She hoped that she was dreaming, and that she would wake up in the Humvee.

The creature in front of her burst into fire and ash as a blade erupted from its chest. It whistled a scream as it died and disappeared. The smell of sulfur engulfed her. The other two drew back into the darkness. She could hear grunts and groans as creatures fought and died in the night. She lifted her head, and looked up at the night sky, waiting for her death. She knelt there, tears running down her face, gazing up at the beautiful stars.

Wisps of ash floated across her face. She blinked and rubbed her eyes as the ash drifted. Another whistling scream sounded, and a head thudded on the road in front of her. Black eyes stared from a reptilian face. The head charred, blazing from the inside, curlicues of flame racing across the features. The head collapsed inward as the flesh was consumed. She gasped for air, not realizing that she had been holding her breath. The infernal creatures were dead, and her dread lifted. She felt human once more. She felt a hand on her shoulder, and another one lightly patting her on the back, as if trying to help her breathe.

"Are you okay? No, no, that's okay, you can stay kneeling if you need to."

She didn't want to, she wanted to stand up. But she was weak. She grabbed one of his hands, and pulled to stand up. He quickly understood what she was trying to do. He put his other hand under her arm, and used both hands to help her stand. Hartman stood up, and almost immediately fell back down. He put his arms around her to help her stay upright. She leaned into his warmth, shivering.

"Okay, okay. You've been through quite a lot tonight. You've been shot at, you've been blown up, left behind by your comrades, and almost devoured by Djinn. I think you've had a pretty exciting night so far."

She gasped, "Dj..., Djn, Djinn?"

"Yes love, that's what those creatures are, or were. You're lucky to be alive."

The tears began again. She tried to stem the tide by pressing her hands to her eyes. She was sobbing, the near death experiences too much for her.

"Don't worry. You should have seen my reaction the first time I had to deal with something like that."

She wiped her eyes, fiercely. She was in shock, and knew it, but she didn't like her emotion betraying her to this stranger.

"Are you okay, Specialist?"

She took a few deep breathes, then nodded, "Yes, I think so."

“Are you good to walk?”

She nodded again.

“Okay, we need to leave, but not in the direction you were heading. If we go that way, we might run into Taliban, or worse.”

She didn't ask what the worse might be. She had a pretty good idea. She knew that she didn't want to have to meet anything like that ever again in her life.

She looked at her savior. He was unassuming, a little on the short side. She couldn't tell much about him in the dark. He had a beard, but it wasn't a Taliban two hand. It was just long enough to paint his features. He was wearing the Afghanistan perahan wa tunban, or shirt and pants, plus a jacket, vest, and sandals. He had a Pashtun turban wrapped around his head. A Kalashnikov rifle was slung across his back. The swords that he had used against the creatures were sheathed on his hips.

She stiffened, and pulled away slightly, realizing that he might be Taliban. He felt her stiffen, “Don't worry, love, I'm not Taliban, or even Afghani.”

His English was perfect, with just a slight accent that she couldn't place. She relaxed a little bit.

“Can you stand unaided?”

She felt better, so she nodded.

He slowly let go of her, standing ready to catch her if she fell. She didn't look like she was going to hit the dirt, so he bent over and picked up her rifle. She braced as she realized he had both weapons, realizing that she didn't have a weapon to defend herself with. He noticed her reaction, but he didn't say anything. He checked to make sure the rifle was on safe. He did a press check to make sure there was a round in the chamber. He handed the rifle back to her.

“You're going to need this.”

She took it, immediately feeling better with the rifle in her hands. Now, she was pretty sure she could trust him as well. If he wished her harm, he would never had given her the rifle. She emulated his motions, checking it to make sure it was on safe, a quick press check to ensure it had a bullet in the chamber, and smacked the bottom of the magazine to make sure it was still firmly seated.

He nodded in satisfaction when he saw her check the rifle, which indicated to him that she was getting over her shock, “Are you ready? We have a few miles to cover to get you back to your unit.”

She nodded.

He smiled, “You're a quiet one, aren't you?” She didn't say anything, and he continued. He pointed in the direction they needed to walk, “We're going that way. It's not the way you came from, but I can get you back to the Ring Road quicker in that direction.

She would have to trust him, she had no choice, “Okay.”

“I'm going to walk in front of you. You know your Army's hand and arm signals, right?”

She nodded.

“Okay, this is stop, this is freeze, this means danger zone, and this means enemy, yes?”

She nodded again.

“So, if you see me make these signs, you follow them. Or, if you see me stop, you stop. If you see me kneel, you kneel. If you see me lie down, you lie down. And, most importantly, if you see me running, you run in the same direction that I do, and try to beat me to wherever I’m running to, okay?”

Another nod.

He turned and started walking. She followed. Like before, she concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other. There were a few low hills in front of them, and she followed him as he led her across. They walked for a mile, and then two. Time passed slowly. They topped one more, low hill, and she saw the prettiest sight she had ever seen. It was her convoy, sitting at the juncture of Highway 1 and the road where they had been ambushed. They were only a mile away.

“Okay, we’re almost there.”

She started crying again. She hated her weakness. She remembered one of her favorite movies, and thought, “*There’s no crying in the Army!*”

He turned to her, “It’s okay. No problems. You’re going to be okay, I promise.”

“Will you stay with me until I get back to my unit?”

He thought about it, and rubbed his beard, “Well, it’s going to complicate my life just a little bit, but I’ll stay with you until then.” He nodded his acquiescence to her wish.

He turned to walk down the hill, to the group of Humvees and trucks. She reached out and stopped him before he could take a step.

“Please?” she asked.

“What?”

“Please, who are you?”

“Oh, my name’s Eli. Come on, let’s get you where you belong, okay? It’s not too far now. I’m pretty sure they’re worried about you.”

She nodded, suddenly realizing that she was missing in action. Her professionalism came back. She knew she needed to get down to the convoy. He put his hand on her arm, “here, why don’t you walk in front of me. They’re probably jumpy right now. Dressed like this, they’d probably think I’m a Taliban trying to finish what began earlier. I would hate for them to start shooting before I get you to them.”

She stepped in front of him and began walking, “What are you doing here?”

“It’s my job. I find missing people.”

“Are you Special Forces?”

“Ah, nothing special about me, young lady.”

She slipped on the sloped gravel. She felt his strong hands grip her arm, and help her stay up.

“Thank you.”

“It’s nothing. Come on, we’re almost there. They’ll see you soon enough.”

She kept walking forward. One of the infantry soldiers, Corporal Meredith, saw her first. He yelled over at Lieutenant Macy, “Lieutenant, I think you should take a look. I think it’s Hartman!”

2nd Lieutenant Macey looked at SFC Summer. While SSG Alciannas was in charge of the logistics part of the convoy, 2nd Lieutenant Macey was in charge of the overall convoy, the infantry commander, and SFC Summer was his platoon sergeant. SFC Summer did what any experienced NCO would do, and went to the

other side, away from where Hartman was walking in, just in case this was some kind of diversion. If it was a diversion, he would be in place to direct fire on the attack. The vehicles were arranged in a circle. Everybody took cover, ready for another ambush. The three wounded soldiers from the IED explosion were in the center of the circle. A Combat Lifesaver was working on them, though injuries were light.

Hartman had been discovered missing when SFC Summer did a head count and ACE report. The Lieutenant sent a contact report to his command via radio, as well as the information about the three wounded and one missing soldier. Right now, helicopter gunships were about five minutes out. There was a rapid reaction force racing out to the position as well, with an additional platoon of infantry. The lieutenant was going to lead his convoy back to the area as soon as they had the gunships on site.

Lieutenant Macey raced over to Corporal Meredith. Meredith pointed towards SPC Hartman. She was walking calmly to the convoy. Macey put his hand on Meredith's shoulder, then pointed at two other soldiers, and said, "Meredith, Clancy, Alcides, go check her out. Get her back here, ASAP."

It killed Macey to send the soldiers out when he wanted to go, but he knew that SFC Summer would kick his ass if he ran out there. It was the lieutenant's job to manage operations, not play the hero. The sergeant would be very respectful when he did so, but it would still be a major verbal ass kicking. As Meredith and the two soldiers ran out from behind the cover of the Humvees, Macey yelled up at the Humvee gunners to keep them covered.

He couldn't just let the missing 'soldier' walk up to the Humvees. He had to make sure that she was, in fact, Hartman. If it wasn't Hartman, he needed that person checked for explosives to make sure they weren't on a suicide mission. The three soldiers got to Hartman quickly. CPL Meredith did a quick check for explosives. The three soldiers surrounded her, and walked her back to the vehicles. Macey was very relieved to see it was, in fact, SPC Hartman.

She walked into the cover of the Humvees, and immediately, several soldiers clapped her on the shoulders, happy to see her back. Macey was happy as hell that he hadn't lost a soldier. It would have weighed heavily on him to lose a soldier, and have to explain to her parents that she had been lost under his command. He walked over to SPC Hartman, "Are you okay, Specialist? How did you find us?"

She looked around, looking for Eli, "Eli helped me. Where is he? I want to thank him for helping me get back."

Lieutenant Macey looked at her, "Eli? There's nobody with you, Specialist. You walked in here by yourself."

She looked around, confused, "But, he was right there with me."

Macey was suddenly very concerned, "Let's get you over to the combat life saver. I think you have a concussion."

He turned and walked her to the medic. The sound of helicopter blades beat percussion against the hills as gunships arrived on station. Macey told the medic about her possible concussion, and headed back to his command Humvee to radio back the good news that she had been found.

Hartman was ecstatic when she saw her crew. They were all banged up, but everybody was alive. SPC Peltier jumped up and threw his arms around her, “You saved my life. I couldn’t get in, and you pulled me down. I saw the Humvee tipping. I knew I was a dead man. I saw the ground racing up at me.”

SSG Alciannas and PFC Reyes, the driver, stood up and walked over. Peltier stood back, embarrassed by his reaction. Alciannas gripped both her shoulders. He looked deep into her eyes, and said in his lilting Haitian accent, “It is good to have you back, Specialist Hartman. You had us very worried.”

The congratulations continued as people walked by. Combat medics showed up with the relief forces and took charge of the wounded. They herded their charges to ambulances for the trip back to Bagram. Before she got into the ambulance, Specialist Hartman looked around for her savior. She wondered if she would ever see Eli again.

Chapter 1

Vampires, Witches, and Werewolves, Oh My.

The sound of bass thudded through the alley. The noise was coming from one of the hottest hip-hop clubs in New York. The main club entrance was on Empire Boulevard, but this alley ran directly behind it. Two large men guarded the back of the club. Both stood over six feet, and massed over two hundred and twenty pounds, none of it fat. One was a light skinned Hispanic, the other an ebony skinned black man. Their breath hung as thick fog in the cold of the night. Both of them wore black leather jackets, jeans, and heavy boots. Glock 9mm pistols were holstered on the right side of their belts, and magazines with extra bullets were holstered on the left. They wore watch caps against the cold. Gloved hands were crossed before them. These two were professionals. It wasn’t the entrance to the club they guarded, though. Instead, they guarded the entrance to catacombs below the building.

Eli watched steadily, noting the people that went in and out of the catacombs. At current count, there were twelve women, and seven more guards, each as large as the two on the door. He was waiting for someone in particular, though, who hadn’t arrived yet. This was a long time coming. He had tracked this individual for many years, across Europe and South America. The last time he had seen the coven master had been in the jungles along the Amazon.

Brazil was an assignment he didn’t enjoy. He hated the jungle, and that coven had been extremely brutal. They preyed on street children from different cities across Brazil. Those children were considered throwaways by society, and when they disappeared, the authorities didn’t care. The horrors he had seen when he destroyed the coven would have given a normal man nightmares for the rest of his life. The coven master had gotten away, though, sacrificing the coven to gain his escape.

It had taken a year for him to track the coven master. Eli knew that the vampire would eventually make a mistake. It was only a matter of time before Eli found him. Now, he had tracked the fiend down. Missing people were often the trail that Eli had to follow. Clusters of activity gave these monsters away. The horror was, that children were a disproportionate representation of the missing that he tracked. It was always the innocent that suffered. The missing child he was looking for was Cynthia Rowland, kidnapped off the street at a park in Brooklyn. Eli was hoping find her before anything happened to her tonight.

His present business aside, Eli was happy to be in New York. He missed civilization. It had been a few years since he was in NYC, and a long time since he had spent more than a few days in the city. After a few months hunting in New York, he narrowed the area down to Brooklyn and then to this area off of Prospect Park. It was a matter of following the crime statistics. The missing children stuck out from the regular crime in the area like a bruise on the city.

Eli watched. The hip-hop club was a good setting to hide the activities of the new coven. The master and his coven were able to move unnoticed in the area. There was also a good selection of physically fit males to recruit for the guardians. They were from the area, so they blended in well. Their old gangs were schooled pretty quickly about the dangers of objecting to the new affiliations and activities of their old members.

After he worked out the location of the coven, he rented this small apartment across the alley from the club. He had been here, on and off for a week, watching their activities. It took a while, but he found the weak link. That weak link was more than willing to give up the coven master's activities and schedule. The weak link was on his way out to the ocean, the body dropped into the Hudson. Now, Eli watched the alley, drinking a coke. The light in the apartment was turned off to avoid unwanted attention. Lately, Eli was in the apartment twenty four/seven, waiting.

He hoped that he could take some time off after this mission, take in the sights, and see how much the city had changed. It had been fifty years since he was able to spend time in New York. Now, he flew in for work, and then he flew back out. When he first came to the city, speakeasies, prohibition, and mobsters like Lucky Luciano were the social problems the city had to deal with. Now, new gangsters, more violent than the old ones, were the social blight on the city.

Tonight was the night though. He knew that from the astrological alignments that were occurring. That and the blood moon tonight. That crap was readily believed by 'witches' that it had become standard stock. It was part of the shtick that the master used to lure his mistresses into the 'coven.' Foolishly, they thought that the rituals they participated in were some type of Gaian Celtic ritual, not recognizing the demonic nature of the magic, and the damage it did to them as they participated.

He shifted on the seat, leaning forward. Modern culture had done much to destigmatize and legitimize the occult. Most of it was harmless. Sometimes, though, when a man like the coven master was involved, souls hung in the balance, warped by a series of what seemed to be harmless choices that became more dangerous as they continued participating.

The drugs, the cult, the sense of belonging to something bigger than themselves, led to disaster for these rich, bored Manhattan socialites. They liked the adventure, slumming in Brooklyn. It helped relieve the ennui of their rich, spoiled existences. It was the Manson family, only with a demonic twist. The socialites were sophisticated, though incredibly naïve. They didn't realize that the child's sacrifice made them victims as well. Tonight, they had made a conscious decision to give their souls to evil, though they didn't understand this. To them, there was no good or evil. There was no walking away from this decision. Their path to darkness and damnation was complete.

A black limousine arrived at the end of the alley. It pulled up far enough for the back door to open onto the alley. The chauffeur ran around the limousine and opened the door. Eli watched the coven master step out. Eli leaned back, pulling away from the window. If he was seen now, the coven master would bolt. Eli would have to start the hunt all over again. It could be a year or more before he found this creature again. Eli studied him, not looking directly at him. He knew the coven master would feel Eli's gaze, so he used peripheral vision to watch the vampire walk down the alley.

The vampire was a bearded, olive skinned man, thin, but taller than the two guards at the entrance of the catacombs. Long hair brushed against the fur collar of the long, leather coat that swept the ground as he walked. The coat was open to showcase the expensive clothes and gold chains. Even in the cold, his shirt was unbuttoned, showcasing his muscularity and the masculine, hairy chest. The coven master was all rock'n'roll. He was Morrison, Plant, and Mercury all rolled into one. He had a vibrant sexuality that lured bored socialites. The coven master nodded at his guardians, and walked between them to the door. The door opened, and he disappeared into the catacombs.

Eli stood up and stretched. He already had the pistol, a Springfield XD, .45 caliber, belted on. He picked up the Keltec shotgun, and shrugged into the harness that it was attached to. He put on his long leather jacket. He turned to the door, and walked out of the apartment. He shut the door, and locked it. He walked down two flights of stairs, and then out the front door to the cold of the night. He breathed in the chill air.

Eli walked around to the back of the building, through a weed filled side alley that opened on the alley in back. The cold air eddied and trash flew before the wind. He was thankful that it was cold tonight. Ordinarily, there would be prostitutes plying their trade as single men came out of the club, the girls earning money to pay for their drugs. The smell of urine, from men unwilling to wait in long lines inside the club, overpowered the senses on a warm night. Not tonight, thankfully. It was too cold for them to brave the alley. As it was, there would be no innocent bystanders or witnesses.

He took a deep breath and stepped around the corner. Brownstones and brick buildings framed the alleyway. Eli immediately drew the notice of one of the catacomb guardians. He turned and walked in their direction, waving towards them as he walked. The guardian took the back of his hand and hit the other guardian on the arm, pointing with his chin.

The man walking towards them was a short man, approximately five foot five inches tall, weighed about one hundred and thirty pounds, looked to be in his

mid-forties. He had curly brown hair, and a close cropped beard. He was dressed in a long, brown, leather coat. He had on khaki pants, brown shirt, and brown leather work boots. He walked closer, then waved again at the guardians. "Hey, I think I'm lost. I'm supposed to do an interview with DJ I. Is this the entrance to the Rub? I need to get in before I lose my interview. Here's my press pass."

The guardians relaxed as the man talked. If they had given it thought, they would have realized that his clothes marked him as an outsider, someone who wasn't in the music business at all. The mention of the press pass allayed their suspicion. They didn't have time to realize their mistake, though. His hand came forward, and only then did they know.

They tried to make up for it with a partial shift to their animal forms, relying on instinct instead of training. They were both lycanthropes, the demonic magic inside that had perverted their souls lending power to the shift. Odds were extremely good that both of these men had done some horrific things in their lives to manifest their nature in this way. Not that anything was left. Their souls had been consumed by the evil within.

They had no chance to complete the shift. Eli shot them both in the chest, at point blank range. The silver in the bullet hit their flesh, shunting the magic from their demonic possession. They screamed as their bodies could no longer process the magic that sustained them. Demonic possession had taken their souls, and replaced it with hellfire. The conduit for the demonic magic was broken. Their bodies could no longer contain the hellfire, and it ate them from the inside out. They perished in a conflagration of energy. The sound of the music from the club drowned out the gunshots and the screaming. Eli stepped back from the ashes drifting slowly on the cold wind blowing down the alley. The smell of sulfur whirled away.

Frangible was such an interesting word. He loved the way the word felt in his mouth. It filled the mouth, and rolled off the tongue. Eli loved saying it. Silver, while one of the best metals for killing demon spawn and the possessed, was not a very good ballistic metal. It was too hard, and didn't take the spin imparted from the lands and grooves of the gun barrel. Gold, platinum, and palladium were also good for killing the possessed, but was too expensive to make his special bullets with. All of these metals were too hard to make a good bullet. So, experimentation and modern technology were used to create a silver, frangible bullet.

Frangible bullets were originally designed to keep bullets from over penetrating. If a sky marshal had to shoot a terrorist, bad things would happen if the bullet penetrated through the terrorist, and then compromised the skin of the aircraft.

Frangible bullets were made from a powdered metal in a polymer adhesive. He had taken it one step further, and made his frangible bullets with powdered silver. Since the bullets were frangible, they had good ballistics coming out of the barrel, they transferred all the energy of the bullet to the target, and they shattered, spreading fragmented silver and polymer powder through the bullet cavity. It sure beat having to use knives or swords to fight lycanthropes and other nasty demonic creatures. Plus, since a lot of them use pistols and rifles, it evened the score.

He walked up to the door, and looked for booby traps. After so many years, he understood that a careful man lived much longer. He didn't see any, and slowly opened the door, looking for other problems. He saw a young man in the room.

The young man looked like one of the local Italian kids. He was dressed like the other guardians. He seemed to be human, though. The Italian didn't notice him immediately, so Eli stepped in and quickly shot him. Eli caught the guy as he was turning to see who had opened the door to let the cold air in.

There was another man there who didn't think twice about the guy Eli had just shot, and turned to run down the hallway. He shot him in the back, twice to make sure the thug didn't get back up. The thug was another human. Evidently there were more people in here than the ones he counted coming in. It didn't matter, though, human or possessed. Anybody working here was on the wrong side. He had no mixed feelings about what needed to happen. All he had to do was think about Cynthia, and all hesitation vanished.

He holstered his pistol, and pulled out the Keltec pump shotgun. The shotgun held fifteen shells. These were different than the bullets. Shot didn't need the spin of the lands and grooves of the barrel for accuracy. The shot was silver. As Eli walked forward, he noticed the small camera mounted just inside the door.

Ah well, they know I'm coming, he thought. He shot the camera. He didn't want them to know what he was preparing for them. He pulled a flash bang out, pulled the pin, and threw it into the room beyond. He put his hands over his ears. It went off, his hands dropped to his weapon, and he went into the room. There was a guardian, and two more humans. The humans were disoriented by the flash bang. The guardian was caught changing, half way between forms. He shot the lycanthrope first, then finished off the two humans. The lycanthrope burnt to ashes, and the two humans collapsed on the floor, blood pooling from their wounds.

He stepped around the spreading blood, and walked past to the open door leading downstairs. He looked down. He could see shadows moving, so he knew there were more down there. He didn't know if they were guardians or humans. It didn't matter at this point. He pulled out one of his special grenades, the body cast from silver. He pulled the pin and tossed it downstairs. He listened to it ping as it hit concrete. He heard footsteps and yelling as they tried to get away from the grenade. The grenade went off. He ran down the steps to catch anybody that might have survived. Two more guardians were disintegrating, caught by the silver fragmentation. Two humans were dead, and one was dying on the ground. He put a boot on the throat of the dying man, crushed his trachea to help him along, and kept moving forward.

The architecture changed as he walked forward. He could tell that he was entering a much older area of the city. The newer construction changed, and old bricks, in place for centuries, replaced the concrete. Some of it had crumpled, leaving brick dust mixed with dirt and puddles of water. The air in the passage way grew musty. In this area of the tunnel, roots had broken through some of the brick work. His feet splashed through deeper puddles, stealth compromised by the noise. It was getting darker as the electric lights faded behind him. He turned on the combat flashlights attached to his side arm and his shotgun.

Right now, violence of action was on his side. Eli knew that if he stopped, it would give them time to prepare for him. He moved forward into the tunnel quickly, watching for traps. A human stepped from an alcove, and Eli shot him. Eli jumped over the body as he continued down the catacomb. A large lupine shape

came charging towards him. He shot it, and ran through the flaming ashes. He came to a low room with several tunnels. The tunnels explained how the extra people had gotten in.

Three lycanthropes in full wolf form charged. He shot one, then two. Ash filled the room as the last one launched at him, grabbing his arm, trying to rip it from his body. The lycanthrope's teeth ground down on the chainmail under the leather. The lycanthrope was too close to use the shotgun, so he dropped it. It swung down on its strap and smacked against his body. He swept the shotgun aside, pulled his pistol and shot the lycan before it could break his arm. Ash fell like heavy rain in the room. He holstered the pistol. He looked at the sleeve of the leather jacket, mournfully. It was shredded. He really liked that jacket. It was comfortable.

He felt, more than heard, the growl from the center tunnel. From the gloom a large possessed, half wolf, half man, walked towards him, growling. The face was elongated into a snout, the ears pointed, but the rest of the features were human. Wire like fur covered the body of the lycan. The eyes burned with intensity, a raw pulsating hatred. Eli could see hellfire in the eyes of this lycan. This was the pack leader.

Spittle flew from its mouth, the clawed hands flexing, "Face me, human. I'll rend you limb from limb. I'll tear your life's blood from your throat."

Eli looked at the intense muscularity of the pack leader. This demon was massive, thirty pounds heavier than the largest of the other guardians. This was a monstrous lycan, truly one of the largest Eli had ever seen. He would have to handle this carefully.

Eli whistled and said, "Good boy, who's a good boy. Go ahead, sit, come on now, lay down. Good boy!"

The beast howled, and ran at him. The muzzle of the shotgun leaped up. Eli pulled the trigger. The pack leader screamed in hatred and frustration as it died, the howl echoing through the tunnels.

Eli racked the shotgun, chambering another round. He yelled, "Anybody else want a Scooby snack?" There was no answer.

Three tunnels lay before Eli. He didn't know which one was the correct one, so he took a guess on the one the pack leader was in. He walked forward through the dim tunnel, footsteps splashing in puddles. The sound, "schru, schru, schru" of metal rubbing on metal echoed down the tunnel as he took time to slide more shells into the shotgun, and replace the magazine in the pistol with a full one.

He saw a light at the end of the tunnel. It was an open door to a room. The light in the hallway grew as he continued. He walked forward, and stepped through the door. The room looked like it had been pulled out of a Hollywood script. It had skulls. It had candles. It had ancient grimoires. There was a roughhewn table, roughly circular. The table looked like it had been carved from the cross section of an ancient oak tree. It was wide, about ten feet across. Eli wondered how the hell they had gotten it down here. Behind the table was a stone altar. Next to the altar was an ancient, evil blade. Cynthia was lying on the altar. The little girl looked uninjured. Eli played for time. He looked around the room to get an idea of what he was up against, and to let his eyes adjust to the light.

The vampire stood on the other side of the room, across the table, next to the altar. He looked like an Eastern European rock star, with long hair, unbuttoned silk shirt, hairy chest, gold medallions, blue jeans and cowboy boots. Eli lived through the seventies, but this guy looked like he was still trapped there.

Eleven women were in the room standing, looking back at Eli. They were all well dressed in different styles. Brunettes, red heads, blondes, they were all different, but they were all exactly the same. They were all ... hollow. They had no depth. They were superficial. They were bored. The coven was their latest cause to make themselves feel better about themselves and the world they lived in.

The twelfth woman was busy. The coven master smiled and waved at him. He took the moment to finish with a shudder. The woman, stood and turned to face Eli. The coven master zipped up, then pulled her close to fondle her breasts. She leaned into him. Eli could tell that she was excited by the attention.

One of the women spoke. A pretty brunette, she was dressed like the rest, though their clothes all represented different designers. Eli wondered what was up with New York's fascination with black clothes. "This is him? This is the guy that's been chasing you all over the world? He's nothing. You should just kill him."

Eli heard the emptiness in her. He knew that she craved excitement. She wanted to see his blood. This was a woman that liked to have men compete for her. She probably put her boyfriends in impossible situations in which they had to defend her. Eli smiled at her.

She was disgusted, "Kill him now, Master, so that we can begin."

The shotgun came up, and her eyes grew wide as she took in the size of the hole in the muzzle of the barrel. He shot her. The other women screamed as they lost control of the situation. It was fun for them to kill, not so fun to be killed. Things suddenly became very real for the 'witches.' They were no longer bored. Some tried to hide, some ran at him, some tried to run past him. He shot seven with the shotgun, then pulled his Glock and shot the rest. Some pleaded for mercy. When that didn't work, they died pleading for their master to save them. They quickly figured out that their coven master had no interest in protecting them.

The master of the coven was laughing maniacally. He pushed the woman he was fondling away so that Eli could get a good shot at her. The coven master looked at the slaughter around him and leaned against the large, round table. He was covered with the splattered blood of his disciples. He pulled pills from his pocket, shook his head, then began talking, "That was precious, the look on their faces when you just started shooting them. I haven't seen anything that funny in a good, long time." He looked down at the pills in his hand, and then, as if realizing that he had been a poor host, held them out to Eli, "This is the best X in the city. You want some?"

Eli shook his head no. He turned the shotgun towards the coven master. The coven master placed his hand on Cynthia's neck. The nails on his hands became talons, the threat to the girl implied, "Oh, that's not nice. You're a guest in my home, and you threaten me? That's not civilized behavior."

"You kill children. I don't think you should lecture me on civility."

The coven master stroked Cynthia's hair, the talons catching on strays, "I think I'll lecture you on anything that I want. Besides, that's not very sporting."

Eli stared intently at the coven master, then let the shotgun hang from the strap, "If you want sporting, how about this?"

He reached into the recesses of his coat, and pulled two ironwood sticks that had been sharpened with points on the end. He knew this demon type. They were vain. Their egos ruled their emotions. Sharpened wooden stakes would play to the ego. It was so Bram Stoker, so Ann Rice.

The coven master laughed again, amused by the stakes, "Ah, this will be much more fun. Not like the trap you set for me in Brazil. That was so very ... one sided. There was no sport, no chance."

Eli shook his head, "I'm not here for sport. I just want to take care of business. But if it's sport that you want, how about a wager? Winner takes all."

The coven master was intrigued, "What is your wager?"

"The only thing left to bargain about of course, Cynthia."

"Is that her name? You want to bargain for the little girl?" The coven master inhaled her scent, kissed her on the top of the head, and cradled her neck in his hand.

Eli wasn't worried about him biting Cynthia. Contrary to modern myth, it took more than a vampire's bite to turn a victim. The 'victim' had to make a willing choice to sacrifice their soul to the vampire. They had to relinquish their souls to darkness. No, he was worried the monster would slice her throat, break her neck, and hurt her.

"Well, the little girl, and a life, of course."

"Hmmm, you're saying, that if I kill you, I get to keep my snack. If you kill me, then you get to take her with you?"

"That's my proposition."

The vampire thought about it, then replied, "Well, not much of a wager. I think that's probably the only option left to us. But, if you put your shotgun and your pistol down on the floor, I won't hurt her. At least, I won't hurt her until after I've killed you. I just want it to be you, your 'sticks,' against me. Nothing else. Deal?"

The coven master could see Eli struggle with the idea of being almost defenseless against him. To emphasize his point, the coven master kissed the top of the girl's head again, enjoying the softness of her hair against his lips.

Eli's body posture changed as he acquiesced, "Okay. If that's the deal, then I'll take it."

Eli placed the wooden sticks on the table. He unhooked the shotgun, and laid it on the floor.

"No, go ahead and pump it so that all of the shells are out of the shotgun."

Eli complied, and racked the shotgun until there were no more shells. The shells hit the floor and rolled away. He laid the shotgun on the floor. He did the same thing with the pistol. He pulled it from the holster, and hit the magazine release. The magazine slid into his hand. He put the magazine on the floor, and kicked it away. He pulled the slide on the pistol, and a bullet flew through the air, then tumbled as it hit the floor. He placed the pistol on the ground. He picked up the two ironwood Eskrima sticks, and moved away from the table.

The coven master smiled. He set the girl back down onto the altar. He walked around the table, towards Eli. As the vampire walked towards him, Eli circled away from the door of the room, avoiding the corpses on the floor, drawing the

coven master to him. Soon, they were on the sides of the large room, the little girl directly across from the door, the large desk between them and her, four points on a square. Eli hoped this would keep the coven master away from Cynthia.

“You know, I’m tired of you interrupting my fun. This is the third coven that you’ve destroyed.” As the vampire spoke, his human body fell away, the grotesque figure of the Nosferatu from European legend replacing the swarthy handsome man.

Eli could tell that it was gathering strength, ready to pounce. Eli took up a good stance, jumped in place on his toes to warm up and stay loose. He was ready for the charge. He knew it would come, sooner than later. The coven master would want to take him quickly, so that it could get back to its fun with Cynthia. Eli attacked and took the advantage away from the monster. The vampire was surprised, falling back as the sticks whirled through the air. The first strikes didn’t land, but Eli had driven the monster further out of line away from Cynthia. He had shifted the monster enough that it had to kill Eli to get to her.

The vampire retaliated, talons ripping through the air. Eli blocked the blows with the sticks. He moved his head to the side to avoid a backhand strike from the vampire. The first salvo was finished, and Eli danced back out of range of the monster’s talons. The vampire spit at Eli’s eyes, and Eli shifted his head to avoid being blinded. The vampire struck low and hit Eli in the side, but the talons couldn’t get through the chain metal of the leather jacket.

Eli winced from the blow. The jacket helped, but Eli knew that the blow would have broken a rib if he didn’t have the armor on. The vampire wasn’t a trained fighter, though, and predictable in its movements. The vampire slashed again, and Eli hit the arm from two sides. A loud crack announced the break. The vampire hissed and drew back. Its eyes turned black, and hellfire burst to cover the arm. The arm healed almost instantly, the broken bone knitting quickly.

Eli settled in, preparing for a long fight. He launched another flurry of blows. The vampire tried to dodge them, but it couldn’t avoid everything. It took the blows on its forearms. Eli knew that he was doing some major damage to the possessed. Hellfire flared, and then flared again as magic was directed to heal the vampire. Eli increased the tempo and intensity of the strikes.

The vampire began to worry. The sticks presented a defense that it couldn’t get through. This shouldn’t be possible. No human should be able to match it for speed and ferocity. This human matched him strike for strike, though. The damage it was taking was diverting the energy that fed it, and kept it alive. Nothing it did was able to get through after the one hit. It thought that it would be able to kill the human quickly. It had been mistaken.

Eli was drumming the vampire everywhere now. The hellfire couldn’t keep up. The damage was too great. The vampire snarled, foam spitting from its mouth. It was starting to realize that Eli had set a trap, and the trap was starting to close. Eli had played the vampire like a violin, using its arrogance against it. Now, the sticks beat the vampire like a drum. The strikes rained down on the vampire. It felt one, then the other forearm break. More blows broke ribs. The Eskrima sticks broke the upper arms. Then the unthinkable happened. First one, then the other wooden stake slammed into its chest.

The vampire froze, and started falling. Eli stepped forward and wrapped an arm around the possessed. He used his strength to keep the monster up. He leaned in and said quietly, whispering into its ear, "I know the damage you've caused. I know the pain and suffering you've inflicted. I know about the children, screaming as they died. I know about the torture. Don't think I'm going to make this easy on you."

He let the vampire slip to the floor. The vampire couldn't move, transfixed by the wooden sticks. Eli gently lowered the body to the floor, ensuring that the stakes stayed in place. When the vampire was arranged on the floor, Eli stood over it. He talked as he looked down at his victim, "I could make it easy on you. One bullet, one shotgun shell, and you'd be consumed by hellfire, nothing left but ash. Or, I could use one of these," Eli pulled twin short swords from sheaths harnessed under the leather coat. They were exquisite works of art. The workmanship of the blades, the hilts, and the engraving proclaiming that they were superior to any other blades in the world. He made sure that the vampire could see them. "These swords are Faith, and Mercy. These would end your suffering immediately. But I'm not in a generous mood. I'm not inclined towards Mercy at all."

The vampire was frozen in place. Eli knew that there was nothing it could do. He looked over at the table at Cynthia on the altar. He smiled, and walked around the table. He walked over to the altar, placed his hand on her head, and smiled down at the soft beauty of the girl's sleeping features. He shrugged out of his coat, and picked her up, wrapping her in the coat. It was cold, and he didn't want her to suffer in the chill air. Cynthia didn't move, though her chest rose and fell. He could feel her breath, soft as a butterfly, on his cheek. He used one finger to gently open an eyelid. The pupils were dilated. He frowned. He arranged her on the table so that she would be comfortable. He turned her head from what he was about to do, just in case.

The blade had caught his eye from the other side of the room. Eli looked at the ancient, wicked thing. It was hideous, created to instill fear in its victims. He wondered how many children had died screaming on its ragged edge. He wondered how many innocent lives had been destroyed by this evil instrument. He picked up the blade, and walked back around the table.

He squatted down next to the vampire. "So, here we are. And, in a little bit, you're going to wish you didn't have those regenerative powers."

He couldn't stay too long, but he carved long enough to do major damage and inflict maximum pain. When he was done, he sawed at the neck. He used the heavy blade to saw at the spine and hack until the head separated from the body. He dropped the knife onto the floor. The loud metallic sound echoed in the room and out into the tunnel. He picked up the head by the greasy locks of hair, and looked into the eyes of the vampire. He knew that the intellect was still in there, peering back out at him. He put the head on the chest of what was left of the vampire's body. He pulled the ironwood sticks out of the body. Immediately, the body began to heal. He jammed the sticks back down into the chest. The healing stopped. The vampire was still alive. He grabbed the knife, and rammed it down through the top of the head, pinning the head to the chest.

He stood up, grabbed his weapons and ammunition. He walked over to the girl and gently picked her up. He didn't know how much or what kind of opiates they

put into her, but he didn't want to wake her. God knows she would probably have nightmares for years after this. He hoped she was young enough that she would forget this night, or dismiss it as a bad dream. He stepped out of the room, and walked up the tunnel about thirty feet. He laid her on the floor. He still had something to take care of, and he wanted to make sure that she was safely out of the way. He rummaged around in his jacket, and pulled out a cylindrical object.

He walked back to the corpse. He had a US Army thermite hand grenade. He wedged the grenade into the mouth of the vampire, and pulled the pin. As he walked away, the fuse of the grenade caught, and the thermite began burning at five thousand degrees Celsius. He walked out and scooped up Cynthia. He began jogging down the tunnel to get away from what was turning into a raging inferno. Everything in the brick lined room would be destroyed.

As he jogged past, he heard the cell phone on one of the corpses ring.

I guess his girlfriend is trying to call him, he thought.

He kept jogging. Smoke was starting to pollute the air. He passed another body. The previous cell phone stopped ringing, and the one on this corpse began. That one stopped, and the next phone on the next corpse started ringing. This kept happening as he moved through the tunnels and back up to the entrance. He stopped when he got to the first room at the entrance that led into the alley. It was cold out, so he looked, and found a jacket for Cynthia. It had belonged to one of the gangsters that he had killed. This one had been hung from a hook, so no bullet holes or blood on it. He wrapped the girl in it, and put his jacket back on. Another cell phone began ringing. He sighed. It wasn't going to go away. He walked over to the corpse and rolled it over. He rummaged through the pockets until he found the cell phone. He picked it up, hit 'answer', and listened.

He began talking, his responses punctuated as he listened to the other side of the conversation, "Yeah, I'm done here. What, no, I have to take the girl to the hospital first. I don't know what kind of drugs they put into her. I just want to make sure she's safe." He paused, then continued talking, "What? Who do you want me to meet? Are you kidding me? You know I spend most of my time cleaning up after her, right." There was another pause as he listened, "What, why? Good God. Okay, okay, I'll watch my language." There was another, longer pause, "Yes, I'll meet her, but I'm not happy about it. Where and when?"

The conversation finished. He hit end, then dialed 911, and reported the fire. He threw the phone back down on the corpse. He picked the girl up, wrapped the jacket tightly around her to keep the cold wind at bay. He stepped into the alley and walked into the night, the rhythm of hip-hop music punctuating the timing of his steps.

Chapter 2

A Greasy Spoon in Brooklyn.

Eli carried Cynthia back to the apartment. He placed her on the bed, and began putting equipment away in pelican cases. It wouldn't do to walk around New York with that much armament on him. The only thing he kept was his Springfield XD. He changed jackets. The chain mail was showing through the leather, and would attract too much attention. He called a friend, Detective Roy Mayland.

Detective Mayland had been asleep. He picked up the ringing cell phone and listened. He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes.

"Hey Roy, how's it going?"

He had to think for a minute to place the voice, "Eli, is that you?"

"Yeah, how's it going?"

"Pretty good. It's been a while."

"Sorry it's so early. I hope I didn't wake the wife."

"Too late. She's awake."

"Sorry. Apologize for me."

"She'll understand when she knows who's calling."

"Yeah, well. Still, tell her I'm sorry. I'm in town. I was working, and I found a missing girl. Her name's Cynthia Rowland."

"You mean, the little girl kidnapped from the park?"

"Yeah, I have her here with me."

"How did you find her?"

"You know me, Roy. I have contacts in places you don't want to know about."

Mayland paused as he thought about it, "Yeah, Eli, I know. All too well."

Detective Mayland and Eli had worked together when Mayland was working Criminal Investigation in Iraq. Mayland had quit the Army afterwards and applied for work with the NYPD. Since then, Eli had popped up in New York several times. Every time Mayland got a call from Eli, he knew it was going to be interesting. Mayland knew not to ask too many questions.

"So, Roy, can I meet you at University Hospital of Brooklyn. I need to get her into the hospital. The people that had her gave her something. I don't know what it is. She needs to get checked out."

"Is she going to be okay?" Eli could hear the concern in Roy's voice.

"Yeah, she'll be okay. She's sleeping, and her breathing's good. Better safe than sorry, though."

"Okay, I'll meet you."

Eli hung up. He could hear the sound of emergency vehicles in the distance. He looked out the window. He couldn't see any smoke, so there was still time for them to get there and take care of the fire.

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Thirty minutes later, Eli was handing off Cynthia to Roy. She was still wrapped in the coat.

"Can you tell me where you found her?" Roy asked.

"Roy, you know better than that."

Roy nodded, "Okay, Eli, just asking. What about the people that took her?"

"You don't have to worry about them anymore. They won't be hurting children again."

"Eli, you should let us handle this kind of thing," Roy chastised him.

Eli shook his head, "Roy, if I did that, Cynthia would be dead right now. I got there just in time to stop them. Believe me, if I thought the NYPD could handle it, I'd give you a call and step back. You know what I do. You really think a beat cop could handle some of the things that I deal with."

Roy thought about it, and then shook his head, "No, not after Iraq. That thing almost killed me. What was it you called it?"

"An Efreet."

"Yeah, well, you saved my ass in Iraq. No problems."

Roy took the girl from him, "Hey, Eli, you need to stop by before you leave town again. Nancy would love to see you. The kids are getting big, too. Dave asks about you."

"I'd love to, but I can't promise anything right now. I have something else in the works. Tell Nancy that I'll stop by when I get a chance."

"Okay, Eli. She's going to be disappointed, though."

Eli shrugged, "You know how it is. It's business. Tell her I'm sorry. Give your kids my love."

"Okay. Don't be a stranger though. Three years is too long."

They said their goodbyes, and Detective Mayland took Cynthia inside the hospital. Eli pulled his jacket tight around him to fight off the cold. He turned south and began walking. He had an appointment to keep. Eli walked south on Bedford Avenue to a greasy spoon he liked. He was glad the meet was there. A few toughs eyed him as he walked. He pulled back his jacket and showed his pistol. They didn't know who he was affiliated with or what kind of juice he had, so they left him alone.

He opened the door of the restaurant, enjoying the hot air that spilled out. The place was old. It looked like it hadn't been refurbished since the sixties or seventies. He walked past the patrons to a booth in the back. The patrons were mostly refugees from closing night clubs, trying to get something to eat before they went home.

He took the gunslinger seat to watch the door at the front of the restaurant. The waitress walked over. He looked at her. She was African American, in her mid-forties, and life had not been kind to her. He could see the woman that she used to be, the hope that she had when she was young, and the beauty that she had been. He smiled at her. She smiled back.

"How can I help you honey. My name is Carol. Do you want to start out with something to drink?"

He was early for the meeting, so he decided that he was going to get something to eat. He didn't look at the menu, ordering coffee, black, and three eggs over easy, hash browns, and wheat toast. She walked away with the order, put the ticket in the window, and brought him back a cup of black coffee. The china was ancient, and had a chip on the rim.

"Do you need cream with that, honey?"

He took a sip of the coffee, "No, this tastes pretty good."

"Okay, but you let me know if you need anything."

She walked away to wait on other patrons. He sat there, sipping coffee, waiting for the food to be delivered. Ten minutes later, Carol brought his food to the table.

He gave her a twenty for everything, and told her to keep the change. It was a large tip for the service, and she smiled, grateful for the extra money.

He cut into the eggs to let the yolk run. He applied salt and pepper liberally, and used a piece of toast to dip into the yolk. He liked the taste, and kept eating. The food disappeared quickly, and he piled his silverware and the napkins on top of the plate to make it easy for the waitress to collect. She came back, grabbed the plate, noticed that he needed more coffee, went to the counter and came back with the coffee pot. She smiled at him again, showing more interest in him as she refilled his coffee cup. He returned the smile.

“If you don’t mind, I’m going to keep drinking coffee for a while. I’m supposed to meet someone here. They should be along soon.”

“Don’t worry, honey, you take your time. It’s a cold night out there. You get free refills anyway.”

He thanked her. Some of the night club refugees were beginning to leave the restaurant. He sat there, waiting for the inevitable. Hopefully it wouldn’t come to blows, but you never knew how these things might end up. If she was in a particularly spiteful mood, she might have the entire group attack him. He wasn’t willing to put it past her to do so.

He knew she would be pissed off. She wouldn’t show it, but she didn’t like it when he spoiled her projects. She was very good at what she did. Men and women often committed horrible crimes for the touch of her hand, or a whisper from her lips. He thought about it, remembering what he had done in his past. Thank God for his sisters. They saved his life, and ultimately, his soul.

The door opened, and she walked in. All motion in the restaurant stopped. As soon as she entered, every head turned to drink in the sight of her. Even people facing away from the door felt her presence, and turned around. He watched as lust replaced the normal expressions on the faces of the patrons and employees. He continued to sip his coffee.

She was beautiful, amazingly so. Today, her hair was red, not like it was dyed, but naturally red, with copper highlights you can’t get out of a bottle. Her hair was shoulder length, cut in a page boy hair style. She was wearing a mid-length black leather coat, a black mandarin dress that was mid-thigh, slit to accentuate her long legs, and cut deep in the front to show off her décolletage, which was ample for her frame. She had on four inch, red, gladiator high heels. Her skin was pale, with subtle freckles across her face.

She looked around, and saw him at the back of the restaurant. She had a large smile on her face as she put one hand on her hip, and pointed at him, “You! You’ve made me so mad. I can’t believe what you’ve done. You are one very, naughty boy.”

At that point, every man in the restaurant wanted to be her naughty boy. Now that she had made her entrance, and everybody knew that she was there, she walked through the restaurant, the four inch heels clicking on the floor. She had one hand on her hip, the motion of her hips exaggerated as she walked. Every head in the restaurant followed her. Her hips synchronized the heartbeats in the room to her rhythm. The rhythm was sensual, sexual. She walked to his table, put one finger down, showing off the red finger nail polish, and tapped the surface of the table. She still had the hand on her hip. She pouted.

"I can't believe you did that to poor Marty. Do you really believe that he deserved that?"

He motioned to the seat across from him, and she slid in, slowly, to accentuate the movement of her voluptuous figure. He raised his hand to attract the attention of the waitress, "Another coffee please." He turned to her, "How are you Lilith. It's been a long time since we've seen each other."

The waitress grabbed another cup and the coffee pot. Eli took a sip of coffee, not willing to play her games. Lilith pouted at him, then smiled at the waitress as she brought the coffee. Lilith asked for cream and sugar. Carol licked her lips with the tip of her tongue, feeling the sexuality of Lilith deep in her psyche. She took her time pouring the coffee, basking in Lilith's approval. Eli took it all in, knowing the power that Lilith wielded.

The waitress went back for the cream, and he pointed out the sugar on the table. Lilith picked up the sugar and began pouring it into her coffee, stirring the coffee as she did. Carol brought the cream, and Lilith took it without acknowledging her. Carol looked hurt at the slight. Eli touched Carol's hand. She looked at him, and seemed to wake from a trance. Eli smiled at her, paid for the coffee, and gave her a dollar tip. She smiled at him and topped off his coffee. She turned and walked back to the counter.

He replied to Lilith, "Marty was his name? How ordinary. When I first ran across him in Yugoslavia, he called himself Magnus Dragomir."

Lilith nodded, "yes, he was always dramatic. Truth was, I found him selling used cars in Ashtabula, Ohio." She waved her hand in the air at the memory, "Oh, he was sexy, but he had no real ambition. He did have a taste for bondage, though, and exploiting women. I introduced him to magic, and from then on, he was mine. Still, sixty years was a good run."

She took a drink of the coffee, then stared at him over the top of the cup. It was a sultry stare, and he pushed down emotions that he hadn't felt in many years.

"Did you miss me, lover?"

He cleared his throat, "That was a long time ago. And no, I never looked back."

The pout was back. She reached across the table, and ran one finger against the back of his hand. It was hard to ignore the sensation of her finger against his skin. The pout changed into a seductive smile, "That's not a nice thing to say to a woman. You're supposed to tell me that you love me, you miss me, you've thought of me every minute since we parted. That's how you seduce your lover. You can't tell me you didn't enjoy it. We used to have such fun."

It had been an extremely long time since they were in the same room together, and at that time, they were naked. She had been his downfall. Afterwards, much later, he began to work against Lilith, and others like her. Since then, they had spent the time dancing around each other, never in the same place, trading blows in the fight between good and evil.

He didn't have the defenses back then that he had now. He had been so naïve. He shifted his hand back from her finger, just far enough so that she would have to move towards him to continue. It wouldn't do for him to fall to her seduction, not after what his sisters did for him. They found the only person that could save him, and brought him to Eli's side. He was very lucky that a statement against the

forces of darkness needed to be made. Eli was given a second chance to make amends, a chance that he would never waste.

The pout reappeared at this very slight, though powerful move. She was Lilith, men didn't resist her, "That's not a nice thing to do. I remember our times together fondly. You remember that night when..."

He raised his hands to forestall her trip down memory lane, "That's past. It won't do you any good to try and use it against me." He pointed up towards the ceiling, "I'm in good graces now, and I plan on staying there."

She leaned back, the façade of seduction dropping from her face. The soft, inviting angles of her face became hard and unexpressive, "I should have these men kill you."

Eli felt the mood of the room change. The patrons and staff were cued to her emotions. Eli could feel them looking over at his table, aggression apparent. He nodded, "yes, you certainly could try. I'm notoriously hard to kill, though. Just ask your pet vampire."

Lilith sighed. She ran her long, red nail around the rim of the coffee cup. "I really don't know why we're here, talking to each other. I would prefer to settle our long differences right now, with your corpse on the floor."

He took another sip of the coffee, "Ah, but then your master would be very upset with you. You know what he does when he's upset. I imagine it would be centuries before he finished with the punishments he designs for you. From what I understand, he's quite inventive when it comes to punishment for those who fail him."

The fear in her eyes betrayed the truth of his statement. She leaned back, the hard edges of her face softening. "Point taken. One question before we start."

"Okay, shoot."

"Did you enjoy killing the twelve women of the coven? That's brazen, even for you."

He put down the coffee cup, "That offense, I put at your feet. Those women already made their decision. They murdered, and were willing to murder again. I've lost my taste for trying to rescue those who don't want to be."

She smiled, the seductress once again, "What if I told you that one of those women was a police officer. She was investigating the disappearances of children in the area. She infiltrated the 'coven' to discover who had stolen the children. She was about to blow the whistle on everybody down there. You killed an innocent woman."

It was his turn to smile, "You mean Detective Gaffigan, who was paid by the mafia to turn a blind eye to their operations. The same one who helped them kill a transvestite hooker that knew about her activities with various organized crime members?"

The smile disappeared from her face. She knew she had been outmaneuvered.

He spoke, "Now, can we get down to business?"

She looked at her manicure, seemingly unaffected, and nodded.

"Something new has occurred. There's going to be an incursion."

"Incursion? What do you mean? An incursion of what?"

"From another reality."

He sipped his coffee. She had forgotten hers completely. The conversation had taken an interesting turn and intrigued her, "Continue."

"Our masters are jealous masters. They vie against each other, but they brook no interference from interlopers."

Her face stayed non-committal, "Fascinating. I've heard rumors about this happening before."

It was his turn to show interest, "Really, when?"

She shrugged, "I'm not sure. Before you were alive, certainly. Before I proved my worth to the Master." She inhaled, her chest expanding deliciously, "And what is this to us? Why am I here?"

He didn't like what he was about to say any more than he thought she would.

"We have different strengths. Yours are the ways of magic, the use of demonic powers, subtle treason. Mine are the ways of the warrior, tactics, strategy; the use of weapons against the monsters your master has created." He paused, not wishing to say what he was about to say, then continued, "Our bosses wish for us to combine our strengths. They want us to work together."

She stared at him, and then began laughing. Her feminine laugh made the restaurant patrons look towards her again, the sexual tension rising in the restaurant. She laughed for a good, long time, "Oh, that's rich. We've been circling each other for millennia, two dogs vying for the same bone. Now, they want us to work together? That's foolish."

He wasn't enjoying this at all. The entire restaurant was watching them. He understood the reasons that had been presented to him, but he knew that she would use every opportunity to attack him, to betray him. It was her nature. There was nothing he could do about the situation, however. He would have to play frog to the scorpion. He was trapped in this swim across the river.

"Evidently, everybody else is busy." He held up a hand to stop the question on her tongue, "And no, I don't know what they're busy with." He put the hand back down on the table, "There is no one, or no higher beings that are available to deal with the situation, as it is. They want us to deal with it, our past beside the point."

Her laugh tinkled across the restaurant again, "And when is this supposed to occur? If they've decided this, did they tell you where or when we should work against this *incursion*?"

Eli nodded, "yes, I know the place, and, approximately, the time. I don't know who all is involved, or the magnitude of the response that's needed to contain it."

She put her finger in the coffee, then slowly put the tip of her finger in her mouth, looking innocently at him as she did so, more seduction. He wondered if she even knew she was doing it.

"When and where?" she asked.

He slid a piece of paper across the table to her, "That has the information on it. We have a fortnight to get there. Here's the phone number I'll be using for the duration of this assignment. Text or call, and I'll pick you up on the way. Bring whatever you need. I'll be bringing resources with me as well."

She sat with her finger in her mouth, alternately sucking it, and licking it, "So, two weeks from now. Do they not understand, that we'll be as interested in killing each other as we will in stopping this *incursion*?"

Eli smiled, "I think we can assume that once we're finished with this mission, and the incursion is stopped, that hostilities can commence again."

She continued to suck on her finger, "I hope you'll be a gentleman, and give me notice when you decide when the dance will commence anew."

An expression of innocence appeared on his face, "Of course. When have I not been a gentleman towards you?"

Genuine mirth played across her smile at this statement, neither one foolish enough to believe that the other one would play fair, whatever 'fair' might be. If either one could achieve the upper hand, they both knew that the situation would be exploited.

The meeting was over. She slid across the bench seat, moving slowly, seductively, her décolletage wiggling as she did. Eli sat with stone face though he did enjoy the view. He would never let her know that, though.

She stood, and used her hands to straighten her coat. In actuality, it was just a chance for her to accentuate her curves with her hands. She did it with a wiggle that drew the eyes of every man in the room. There was a group of four at the front of the room that were entirely too interested in her movements. One of them, a large man with prison tats scrawled across his skin, stood up and walked over to Lilith. The man's tattoos and attitude indicated a brutality that would be used if he felt the need. His muscularity indicated time spent in the prison yard lifting weights.

The man walked up and put his arm around Lilith's waist, "hey, pretty lady, how's about you come over and spend some time with me and my friends. I promise you, we can show you a good time."

Lilith giggled, and wiggled again. The thug pressed his case. "I think you should come on over. My boys and me would be real interested in talkin' to you."

As the thug talked, his hand slid down. Lilith looked over the table at Eli, and put one hand over her mouth, aping surprise, "I guess he's serious. I think you may have to defend my honor."

The thug sneered at him, "Little man, if you know what's good for you, I suggest you sit there and shut up. I'll crush you if you get up."

Eli kept sipping coffee, and continued to sit. Lilith's eyes darkened, hellfire flashing, "If you want my cooperation, I suggest that you do your bit here."

He sighed. He knew it would come to some kind of confrontation. It always did when it came to Lilith. He reached for his gun, but Lilith swayed, blocking any shot that he might have. He considered shooting through her, but he didn't think the bullet would penetrate far enough to kill the thug. He started sliding across the seat. The thug stepped around Lilith, and put a hand in his shoulder, "I said stay out of it little man. You won't like what hap..."

He grabbed the thug's hand with his right hand, his fingers on the outside of the hand, his thumb in the meat between thumb and forefinger. He twisted with the right, and used his left hand to give more leverage. He continued his slide out of the seat, turning tightly, the hand and arm of his adversary coming with him as he turned, and the body following. He stopped, turned in the other direction, and the thug flew through the air. The thug landed on his stomach, arm extended behind him, the impact shaking the room around them.

Eli put more pressure on the wrist. He felt it snap. The thug began screaming as the bones ground together. Eli finished by stomping the back of the thug's neck. The screaming stopped. The thug's friends started to stand up, hands clawing at their waistbands. He pulled his XD, and shook his head. The three sat back down, hands up in the air. Everybody else in the restaurant shrank from the confrontation. One man kept saying, "it's cool man, it's cool."

Eli holstered his pistol, watching the three at the front table. They watched everything he did, hands still in the air. He picked up the coffee cup, and took another drink, watching them over the rim. One of them started to lower his hands. Eli sat the cup back down. The hands went back into the air. He walked over to the counter, and pulled his wallet out. He pulled out a twenty and sat it on the counter.

He smiled at the waitress, "Sorry about the inconvenience. You serve very good coffee here."

Carol studied him, a look of unease on her face, suddenly afraid of Eli. The situation had changed dramatically and now she was afraid he was going to shoot everybody in the restaurant. He smiled, "Don't worry, we're leaving now."

He looked back at Lilith, "Well, are you coming with me?"

She looked at the corpse on the floor, then looked back at him. "You've become too familiar with the use of violence. What happened to the man I once loved."

"You never loved me. You seduced me, turned me against my family. I'm only here by the intercession of the Carpenter, and the prayers of my sisters. If they hadn't begged him to save me, I would've spent all eternity in hell. As it was, he took pity on my sisters, and on me, and brought me back. I'm very lucky he decided to use me to make a statement to your boss. So, now, can we dispense with the false tears?"

Eli motioned towards the door. Lilith stepped over the corpse on the floor, and walked in front of him, her hips swaying suggestively from side to side, the slow, erotic stride punctuated by the click, click, click of her heels. He hated himself for it, but his humanity responded to her sensuality. Still, he didn't lose his caution. He walked behind her, ready to deal violence if necessary, paying particular attention to the three friends of the man he had just killed. As Lilith approached the door, he leaned forward, and opened it.

"My, always the gentleman," Lilith stepped out into the cold of the early morning. Lazarus stepped through the door behind her, watching the sun of the new day as it begin to lighten the eastern sky.

The police arrived thirty minutes later. They canvassed the crowd, but they weren't able to get a good description of the man who had killed Marcus Santiago. Nobody could remember the incident at all. It was as if they had all wakened from a dream and found the body on the floor. The police were puzzled, but they didn't worry about it too much, not with Santiago's police jacket. They felt that whoever killed him had done the community a favor. Being a saint had its perks.

Chapter 3

A Cat named Mooch.

Lazarus' first stop was the neighborhood of little Caughnawaga, in Brooklyn. Lazarus walked down the street, the tree leaves orange and red in the October cold. Old brownstones framed the riot of color. A few leaves were just starting to litter the street. It was Sunday afternoon, and children were playing under the watchful eyes of parents or older siblings. It was an inviting street, reminding Lazarus of an older New York, a time before drugs flooded in, making entire neighborhoods untenable for families.

Mohawks were the ironworkers that built most of the spectacular landscape of New York, and Little Caughnawaga had been their home for decades. The size of Little Caughnawaga had shrunk in recent generations as work became more competitive and jobs were harder to find. This section was still firmly Mohawk territory, though, with brownstones that had been in the family for four or five generations. Sam Diabo was one of those Mohawks, and had family that had worked on all of the major construction projects in New York City.

Lazarus was here to see his old friend. He hadn't seen him in almost two years. The last time Lazarus had seen Sam was before Brazil. Sam Diabo was a Mohawk ironworker and warrior. Sam was a decorated war hero who had joined the Marine Corps right after September 11, 2001. Part of it was the warrior tradition of his people. Part of it was patriotism, even though his tribe was a separate nation. Sam had been born in the USA. His family had lived and worked here for generations. It was this reason that he felt that he owed something to the country. A lot of it had to do with his family's legacy as well. His grandfather, Joe, and his father, Jimmy, had worked on the twin towers. The terrorists had destroyed his family legacy when the Twin Towers came down, so Sam felt justified to destroy theirs.

Lazarus met Sam after a confrontation with three men. Lazarus watched the situation go down from across the street. Three men walked up to Sam, gang bangers with something to prove. They probably picked Sam because he was the biggest guy on the street. The leader of the three said something that Lazarus couldn't hear. The leader pulled his shirt up to show Sam the automatic in his waistband. Lazarus could call the three mistakes from where he was. First, the gang toughs were on the wrong street. Second, they had messed with the wrong guy. Third, they didn't have their guns in hand when they accosted Sam.

Most people would have frozen in fear. Not a decorated Marine who had survived the battle of Fallujah. Sam kicked the tough right square in the groin. It wasn't with his toe. Instead, he caught the groin with the top of his foot where it met the ankle, giving a solid blow. From where Lazarus was standing, it looked like a size fourteen or fifteen foot, so there was a lot of surface area. The tough guy rose up onto the tips of his toes, hands instinctively shooting down to cup his crotch. The blow was hard enough that Lazarus heard, and winced at, the impact from across the street. The fight didn't stop there, however.

Sam had great instincts, and knew what was going to happen if he only went half way. He stepped forward, holding the gang banger up with one hand, and pulling the pistol with the other. As soon as he had the pistol in hand, he let go of the gang banger, allowing him to fall to the ground, whimpering, holding what was

left of his crushed testicles. Sam racked the slide, not relying on the hope that there might be a round in the chamber. Then he shot the other two, who, surprised at the result of the confrontation, were still fumbling for the pistols in their waistbands. They hit the ground, cooling rapidly from the double taps that punctured their hearts.

The leader was mewling on the ground, curled in the fetal position, hands cradling his destroyed manhood. Lazarus walked over and held up his hands as Sam rounded on him. Sam lowered the muzzle of the gun towards the ground, "Who are you?"

Lazarus nodded towards the bodies on the ground, "I'm your witness."

Sam looked cautious when he asked the next question, "What do you mean, my witness?"

Lazarus explained, "Well, I was walking down the street, when I saw this one," he pointed at the tough on the ground, holding his groin and moaning, "Shoot those two. Then I watched you disarm him so that he wouldn't be a threat to the neighborhood."

Sam smiled at the explanation, "You know, I wasn't even thinking that far ahead."

Lazarus nodded, "Yeah, I kind of figured that. I thought I would lend a hand. You have some people around here that can corroborate?"

After that introduction, Lazarus visited the gang that the three had come from. More dead bodies persuaded them that Little Caughnawaga was not an area to mess with, and that they shouldn't think about approaching Sam or his family. Lazarus found a fast friendship with Sam, and began mentoring him in uses of controlled violence. When he was satisfied with Sam's capabilities, Lazarus told him what he did. Sam didn't believe it at first. It took a visit to Wall Street before Sam understood what he was up against if he worked with Lazarus.

Sam was a Marine. He had been raised as a Catholic, and still attended church. When he found out who his friend Eli was, he'd been in awe. He jumped at the chance to help Lazarus. It didn't hurt that Lazarus was willing to supplement Sam's income. Ironworkers made good money, but property taxes in New York had risen steadily, making home ownership more expensive. Eventually, the awe subsided as they continued to work together and train together. Their partnership had parted ways on a mission in California. That was when Lazarus had gone to Brazil.

Now, Lazarus walked down the street, smiling at the children, waving at people that he recognized. They waved back, recognizing Sam's benefactor and mentor. Some yelled greetings, some asked where he'd been. This was a tight knit community. The people were friendly as long as they knew you belonged. If they didn't think you should be there, though, Sam would get a call and he would deal with the situation. Nobody had a problem with Lazarus though. Where Sam was concerned, Lazarus slept with the angels, literally. Still, there was that problem with California, but he didn't think that Sam would hold that against him. Lazarus walked to Sam's brownstone, checking the address to make sure he was in the right spot. He walked up the sidewalk, onto the steps, and rang the doorbell.

Sam Diabo was making a sandwich when he heard the doorbell ring. Mooch, his gray tabby was meowing on the floor, hoping for a piece of cheese. Sam had been

spreading mayonnaise on wheat bread, and put the knife down. He walked over to the door and looked through the peep hole. A frown crossed his face. His craggy features made the frown seem more severe. He unlatched the various locks on the door and then opened it. Lazarus looked at the mountain that stood just inside the door. Sam looked around to see if anybody was with Lazarus. Lazarus stood with his hands in his coat pockets, "Are you going to invite me in?"

Sam thought about it, "Dunno, maybe."

Lazarus walked through the door, not waiting for the invitation. Sam frowned again, "Yeah, come on in, make yourself right at home."

Lazarus saw the sandwich makings on the table, "Ah, just in time for lunch."

Sam smiled, "It's ham and cheese. You want me to make you one?"

It was Lazarus' turn to frown. Raised from the dead, he had incontrovertible proof about the source of his resurrection, but he still tried to follow the laws of Moses. He was Jewish, after all. A lot of water had gone under the bridge since then, though. He thought about it, and shrugged, "Yeah, sure, I'm hungry."

Sam walked back to the kitchen, Lazarus following. Sam stood a good nine inches taller than Lazarus. Sam was an iron worker, with the muscle and broad shoulders that came with the job. He was dressed in a white tank top, blue jeans, and work boots. His arms were cabled with muscle developed working on the One World Trade Center, and from his time in the Marine Corps. He had rugged, good looks that reminded Lazarus of a young Elvis.

Sam talked as he walked, "So, Eli, you don't visit, you don't call. I was thinking we wasn't friends no more." His Brooklyn accent punctuated the cadence of the accusation. Eli came from the original pronunciation of Lazarus' name, Eleazar. In fact, Lazarus' registered name on his driver's license was Eli Bethany. Most people wouldn't get the ancient references, and it didn't pay to advertise too much, anyway.

Lazarus shrugged, "Yeah, after that incident in California, I had some things I had to track down."

Sam continued making sandwiches. He tore off a corner from the processed American cheese slice and dropped it on the floor. Mooch quickly gobbled it up, and began mewling for more. Sam pulled down another paper plate and made an additional sandwich. His hands looked huge. The muscular slabs manipulated ham and cheese onto the wheat bread. He pulled out tomato and lettuce and put that on both as well. He placed the sandwiches on the table. He walked over to the refrigerator and pulled out two Labatt's Canadian Ales. He held them up, the question on his face. Lazarus nodded.

Sam popped the tops on the bottles by setting them against the counter, and hitting the top of the bottle. He set a beer next to each sandwich. Sam motioned and Lazarus moved to the chair indicated and sat down. He watched as Sam sat down. Sam wiped the straight, thick, black bangs from his face, which immediately fell back into place.

Sam picked up a sandwich, and motioned for Lazarus to do the same. Lazarus joined him. They bit into the sandwiches. Mooch was trying to find a way up to the top of the table to join them. Sam chewed and swallowed, following the bite with a drink of beer. Lazarus pinched off the corners of his cheese and fed them to Mooch.

Sam spoke, "So, let me get this clear. You left me in the mountains after we killed thirty lycans, and destroyed an entire vampire coven, because you had to track down some things?"

Lazarus continued to chew slowly. The mayonnaise was spicy. He didn't say anything, knowing that Sam would have to get this out of his system.

Sam took another drink, then put the beer down, "Do you know the crap I had to go through to get out of California without being arrested for the war that you drug me into? They take a very dim view of citizens with firearms in that state."

Lazarus nodded, "Yeah, unless you're a pot grower, then you get a slap on the wrist. Still, you have to admit, it was fun killing a bunch of hippies."

Sam thought about it, and a calm smile slowly spread across his face. The crags and sharp angles disappeared for a moment while he contemplated the hippies and yippies that he killed in the mountains of Cali. They were no longer human of course, demonically possessed. Every one of them had damned themselves for power. He'd really enjoyed killing the director and two producers from Hollywood. They'd been responsible for screwing up one of his favorite book series when they brought it to the silver screen. That had definitely been a bonus.

Sam nodded, and pointed at Lazarus' chest with a finger the size of a kielbasa, "Okay, you got a point there. But I had to take the most god awful back roads to get the hell out of California before they put me into prison. I really didn't want to be caught with M4s and .45s. Plus, God help me, I had lead ammunition. They'd have thrown me in with gen pop, and I don't fit in with any of the big gangs. I'd of had to kill a lot of people to stay alive."

Lazarus took another bite, and drank some beer, "Naw, I wouldn't have let it get that far. I would have killed you before you had to worry about anything like that. I wouldn't let you suffer. Besides, they probably would have given you the death penalty for the lead ammunition." Lazarus took another bite, chewed, and swallowed, "I had faith that you'd get away. You're capable. If you weren't, you wouldn't have been working with me, choir boy."

Sam's chewing slowed as he contemplated what Lazarus had just told him. If anybody could kill him in gen pop and not get caught, it was Lazarus. He spent seven years watching and helping Lazarus kill monsters before Cali. The man had skills honed by two thousand years of hard use. Two thousand years of muscle memory was an amazing thing.

Sam was good at killing. He trained as a scout/sniper in the Marine Corps. He killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. He fought to clear Fallujah in Iraq, and Marjeh in Afghanistan, and he knew killing. Still, his skills were nothing compared to Lazarus. Sam was a child compared to him. He had learned much more from the small man.

Sam knew everything about Lazarus. He had known everything about Lazarus before he met him. He knew that Saint Lazarus had been a Bishop in the nascent Christian church, living on the island of Cyprus. He also knew that Lazarus, or Eli as he preferred to be called, had a wife and children. They grew older, and he didn't. He kept living, not changing, not aging.

It was a miracle, but many on the island grew wary of him, and they began to fear what they didn't understand. The talk changed from miracle, and started mentioning deals with the devil. They began talking about witchcraft. This was

problematic, so he had to make alternative plans. The body of pauper who had passed took care of the problem. The pauper had a grand funeral, his body used to bury Bishop Lazarus and put an end to his public career for the church.

After that, he roamed the Mediterranean, the Roman pond, never in one place for too long. He grew tired of the careless cruelty of the Romans. He decided he should learn about war. He joined the Roman legions to learn as much as he could about his enemy. He learned warfare, tactical, strategic, and personal. He learned the use and trappings of power, hoping to find a way to stop the Roman Empire.

That all changed on the day that Michael, the patron saint of Soldiers, appeared to him, and gave him a new mission. Lazarus learned about the world of magic and demonic possession. He began the dance with Lilith and other minions of the Great Deceiver around the world, trying to contain the damage that they wrought on mankind.

He had his successes, but the demons had many, many more, and on greater scales. He couldn't be everywhere at once, no matter how hard he tried. So Lazarus relied on days like today, when he could at least save one precious soul.

Sam leaned back in his chair, the sandwich finished, and he sipped his beer, "So, explain to me why you left me in Cali."

"I found a lead to Lilith. I had to move quickly, or the window of opportunity would close. I had a judgment call. I knew we had cleaned most of the monsters out, there were just a few left for you to deal with. I left it to you to finish our business there so that I could find Lilith."

Sam considered this, still sipping his beer. He leaned the chair back so that the front legs were off the ground, and his voice was frigid, rage barely contained, "Did you find her? I mean, did you kill her?"

Lazarus shook his head, "No, by the time I got there, the trail had gone cold. I wasn't able to find her."

Lazarus took a sip of his beer, and let it slip, "At least not then."

Sam grew very still, a muscle twitching on the side of his face, "And now? Do you know where she is now?"

Lazarus looked at him, sympathy in his eyes, "Yes, I know. And I need your help. But you aren't going to like what I have to tell you."

Sam scowled at Lazarus, "What's the problem. We find her, we destroy her, we send her back to hell until she comes crawling out again. Rinse, repeat."

Lazarus shook his head, "Things have gotten," he hesitated, "complicated."

The front legs of the chair thumped down against the floor, Sam's eyes filled with fury. His little brother, Mikey, had been taken. Sam was only seven years old when his little brother was kidnapped, and never seen again. Sam had been playing outside, furious that his mom made him take Mikey outside with him. He wanted to play with the older kids, and knew they wouldn't let him if his little brother was tagging along.

So he made Mikey sit on the steps as he played in the streets. When he came back, Mikey was gone. The entire neighborhood turned out to find him, but he was never seen again. Sam never forgave himself for what had happened. He didn't know where to channel his anger until he met Lazarus.

"Tell me," Sam responded, "Tell me where she is."

Lazarus knew this was dangerous, but he needed Sam. He needed Sam to watch his back. Lazarus knew he was walking into a trap. There was no one more capable than Sam to help him. Sam knew how to deal violence, and he knew how to control the violence he dealt. He was able to govern his emotions, no matter what was happening. He was also very skilled in a wide range of weaponry, from blades to heavy machineguns.

Plus, Sam had something that was rare for a man that had killed that many people. He had pure motives. He never killed for his own benefit, or to feed any psychological need. Violence had one use in Sam's world. Violence was necessary to keep bad people from doing bad things. Sam knew it was a violent world. He knew there were some people in the world that needed killing, to protect the others that couldn't defend themselves. He had no nightmares, no faces in his dreams to haunt him.

Sam was a student of history. He was a huge, dangerous man, but he wasn't a stupid one. Many people looked at him, looked at his brawn, and underestimated his intellect. Sam, like most good warriors, was a student of history. He knew that the natural state of mankind was war. Peace was ephemeral. Throughout history, when men were reluctant to fight, yearning for peace, they often left themselves open for the predation of other, violent men.

Those violent, evil men were willing to use this reluctance against those peaceful men. The Nazis and Chamberlain were perfect examples of this. Sam knew that he was better off preparing for conflict, not because he reveled in war and violence, but because he never wanted to rely on the vague prospect of other men's kindness and peaceful intent to protect him and the people he loved.

He was just fine with being the one that did the killing. The weak perished. That was why he drove himself to be strong, to be combat ready. He was strong, to protect the weak, the innocent. He wanted to make sure there were no more Mikeys.

Lazarus spoke slowly, "I just had breakfast with her."

Sam was stunned, the bottle slamming onto the table. He leaned forward, poking a finger towards Lazarus, "What the hell. You had breakfast with that evil bitch? You should've killed her."

Lazarus stayed still until Sam controlled the raw emotion. Sam stood up, walked around the kitchen, and finally slammed his hand against the counter, several times. Lazarus was afraid the counter would splinter under the blows.

Lazarus continued, "I couldn't. My orders were received from the boss. In fact, they want me to work with her."

The hits just keep on coming, Sam thought, "Are you kidding me? What in God's own name would induce them to have you work with the vilest woman ever created?"

Lazarus wiped the sweat off the bottle of beer, "There are things that you aren't aware of. How familiar are you with multiple dimensions, or alternate realities?"

Sam shrugged, still pissed that Lilith wasn't dead, "dunno, I've read some science fiction, seen some movies, that's about it."

Lazarus leaned forward, "What if I told you that other dimensions are real, and that there are entities out there that want to invade our world, and feast on the souls of the population of this planet?"

Sam's eyes grew wide, his expression serious, "What, like H.P. Lovecraft or something?"

Lazarus leaned back, and nodded, "Or something, indeed."

Sam was intrigued, though still pissed that Lilith was alive, "So, tell me more. What the hell's going on?"

Lazarus continued, "They're out there, waiting. No, more than that, they're actively trying to breach our reality, and invade our world. Entities that we can only guess at are planning to destroy all life on this planet. If they get here, they'll devour everything, annihilate everything, until the planet is desolate, and there's nothing left. Then they'll move on, find other realities to invade, other planets to destroy, other life to devour."

He paused to take a drink, then continued, "These *others* survive not only on the chemical and physical properties of life, but they also use the souls and living force of that life to power their magic, to open portals between universes."

Sam stopped him, "They sound like locusts. How is this different from the forces of Satan? His minions also plan to destroy all souls, to create their hellish realm on earth."

Lazarus shook his head, "Those damned souls are never destroyed. Once a soul is created in our universe, it's never destroyed."

Sam leaned back, confused, "I thought that Satan was the great destroyer. I thought everything he touched was warped."

Lazarus shook his head again, "No, he's called the great destroyer because he corrupts the world around us, and the souls that he perverts. He cannot feed on or destroy the souls that he corrupts, however. But that can change."

Sam asked the question, "How?"

Lazarus leaned back, spread his hands wide, "How do you think?"

Sam thought, "Ah, the end of times, Armageddon."

Lazarus nodded, "Yes, if the Deceiver wins, then he can feast on his corrupted souls, and even target the innocent, the incorruptible. Nothing will be forbidden to him. That's partially how he's kept in check. If he wins, he'll truly become the destroyer, the ultimate predator."

Sam made the logical leap, "And you need my help."

Lazarus nodded again, "I need you to watch my back, again. I'm going up against forces that I have little knowledge about, and I'll have Lilith and her friends to contend with as well."

He leaned back, and took another drink of beer, "So you see my problem. Your tender feelings aside, I need your help." He put an innocent look on his face, and batted his eyelashes, "Please."

Sam was moody, but he laughed, "Yeah, well, you had me at *are you going to invite me in.*"

Sam walked over to the table, took the paper plates and put them in the garbage can. He pulled open a cabinet, pulled two candy bars out and tossed one over to Lazarus, "Dessert?"

Lazarus caught the candy bar, then peeled the wrapper off and began eating, "I guess this means I'm forgiven?"

Sam smirked, "Sure, just as soon as your money hits my bank account."

Lazarus smiled, "At least my money is good here."

Sam waved what was left of his candy bar in a circle, "Oh, your money's always good. And, thanks for the monthly stipend. That helped augment the ironworker's salary. After all, I have bills to pay. Despite your many faults, leaving me in Cali being one of them, you have good intentions. Besides, I feel better when I work with you. I know that you sleep with the angels. That speaks to my Catholic upbringing."

Lazarus pulled a paper from his pocket. He pushed it over to Sam, "This is a list of things I think we'll need for this mission."

Sam stood up, walked over to the trashcan and dropped his empty bottle into the trash. He grabbed two more from the refrigerator. He did the trick of opening them on the counter again. He walked over to table and put one down in front of Lazarus, "How about another one, Eli." Lazarus finished the one he had, then handed the empty to Sam. That bottle plus the caps were also consigned to the trash. Sam sat down and looked at the list. Sam whistled. The list was extensive.

"Talk about your World War III. Think you have enough written down here?"

Lazarus smiled, "God helps those that help themselves. Better to have it and not need it,"

Sam finished the saying, "Than need it and not have it." He studied the list, "LAW rockets, okay, not sure they make those anymore. Those were replaced by AT-4s."

Lazarus shrugged, "That's what I pay you for, to keep me current."

They discussed the relative merits of the different items on the list, the different calibers, and different weapons. The discussion stretched into four more beers each before they finished. They settled on weapons that would be easy to transport and conceal, which left out the Barrett .50 caliber. Instead they opted for the .338 Lapua Desert Tactical rifle. They also went with Rock River Arms LAR8 in .308. Kimber Warriors in .45 were on their list as well. For anything that wouldn't be put down with those calibers, there was the Smith & Wesson .500. That was it for the small arms. There was also an extensive list of explosives on the list as well.

"So, where we goin'?" Sam asked.

Lazarus wrote it down for him. Sam stared at the paper, "I wasn't expecting a road trip for this."

Lazarus laughed, "Yeah, you and me, like Hope and Crosby."

"Who?"

Lazarus laughed again, "Sorry, before your time."

Lazarus grabbed a piece of paper, and started writing, "The Desert Tactical rifles, and the ammunition for them need to go to this address."

Sam completed the list, then began doing the figures in his head. Since he began working with Lazarus, he had developed contacts who dabbled in some more dubious enterprises. It was amazing what you could acquire if you had the contacts and the cash.

Sam wasn't foolish enough to call from his own cell phone. He pulled a burner phone out of the drawer, walked down the street, and called a number that he had memorized. Then he waited. A text arrived with a series of numbers. He wrote them down. He walked down an alley, away from his house, pulled the battery out, put the phone on the ground, and crushed it under his foot. He kicked it into a storm drain, and walked back to the house.

As he was walking, he motioned to one of the kids on the street and had him run down to get today's New York Times. Sam sat down on the stairs in front of his house to wait. It wasn't that Sam was too lazy to go get the paper. The kid's family didn't have a whole lot of money, and this was one way Sam could feed a little to them, without stepping on the father's ego.

Sam wasn't an ego guy. He didn't need the praise of others. He was happy to help families in the neighborhood, glad to be in a position where he could do so. He didn't need recognition for the money he spread around. He was happy knowing that he was helping one of the families on the street. The kid ran down to the corner grocery, and then ran back, handing the paper to Sam. Sam told him to keep the change, and walked back into the house.

Sam walked back over to the table, sat down with the numbers, and began looking for pages, columns, and words. Lazarus watched him and recognized the book code.

"Smart, changes daily, and they can't figure it out unless they know what paper you're using."

Sam nodded, "Yeah, I introduced the code to them. They have to travel around; otherwise the Feds'll find them. Not a good idea to stay in one place."

Lazarus laughed, "By them, I guess you mean the gun smugglers. Great, now you increased the OPSEC of the weapons traffickers. I don't think that's necessarily a good thing."

Sam shrugged, "As long as I don't go to jail, I don't care. Plus, they've narrowed their operations after some of their less OPSEC capable associates were snapped up by the Feds. Evidently somebody tipped them off."

He paused, and spread his hands, a look of innocence on his face, "I'm not sayin' who tipped them off."

He continued, "Since those associates were snatched up, less guns are going to gangs in the area, and gun crime seems to have dropped. These guys seem to understand the consequences of their actions and possible repercussions if they stray outside the parameters that've been set for them."

Lazarus was impressed, "Win for the community, win for us, bad guys go to jail, and less guns in the hands of gang bangers. Good solution for the problem set."

Sam nodded, "Yeah, now they mostly fence stolen goods."

Lazarus stared at him.

Sam looked back at him, "What? I had to leave them something. If I didn't let them do that, they'd turn to something else that would either get them snatched up by the Po-po, or get them killed. Either way, no supplies for us. So, I made sure that they'd get a little something."

Lazarus sighed, "No rest for the wicked, I guess. No matter what we do, there will always be iniquity in the world."

Sam agreed as he finished the book code. He wrote the location down and passed it over to Lazarus. Lazarus looked at the location, "Not too far away. Do you want me to back you up on this?"

Sam shook his head, "No, it's just a dead drop. I'll leave the instructions for what we need, and they'll contact me with instructions on where to wire the money and the location to pick up our supplies."

Lazarus was becoming more and more impressed by the level of security that Sam had initiated with the gun runners. Still, he wasn't pleased about wiring money to an unknown account. He didn't want to throw his money away, "Are you sure you can trust these guys?"

A sharp guttural laugh erupted from Sam's mouth, "No, I don't trust them at all. We send one quarter of the payment, we get one quarter of the supplies. If we're satisfied, we wire another quarter, receive another location, and then proceed until the transaction is complete. Trust is not a commodity to be dealt in with these guys."

Lazarus was satisfied with the answer. Now that the particulars were settled, and he knew what safeguards Sam had in place, he was happy with the plan. There was only one important thing to talk about, "So, can I crash in your spare bedroom?"

Sam smiled at him, "Yeah, sure. Just as soon as the money hits the bank."

Lazarus laughed. He deserved that after California.

Chapter 4

Myra Rothstein and her cousin, Arnold.

Lazarus was heavy into his workout for the morning, trying to work up a good sweat. He stood in the back yard, two Eskrima sticks whirling through the air. He spent his morning doing yoga, stretches, calisthenics, and a variety of different katas from many different styles of martial arts. He was limber and fast. His katas were flawless, the product of centuries of practice.

Now he used the ironwood sticks to go through his Filipino Eskrima Sinawali exercises. The two sticks flashed through the air as they weaved in and out in the stylistic katas. Lately, he put emphasis on his Krav Maga and Filipino styles of fighting. They were more direct, with less movement, aimed at destroying the enemy as quickly as possible. He still had other techniques that he gleaned from Aikido and Wushu. He enjoyed running through the various styles to keep himself limber, and maintain his mastery over them. He was worlds away from where he began, with the simple Greco-Roman style of grappling and the Roman method of using the shield and gladius.

He was starting to sweat, his body steaming in the cold of the October morning. A cloud rose from his body as he whirled through the different stages. He heard leaves crunch as somebody entered the yard through the side gate. He shifted and he was facing the intruder. Sam stood there, watching him, "So Eli, looks like you aren't slowing down in your old age."

Lazarus smiled, "Old? You're calling me old? I don't feel a day over one thousand."

Sam snorted, "Yeah, well, you may not feel it, but you do have a few millennia on me. So, yeah, I have to put my money down on old."

Lazarus stood up straight and pointed one of the sticks at Sam, "Care to put your money where your mouth is?"

Sam laughed and started taking his jacket off, "What are we going to bet?"

Lazarus thought about it, "I haven't had Jamaican food in a while. How about loser buys?"

Sam nodded, "Okay, you're on."

Sam stripped down to his undershirt. He grabbed two sticks and they faced each other. Sam moved towards his left, and the two began circling. They were relaxed, arms and bodies loose, the sticks held in front of them. The first move was made by Lazarus, testing his pupil to see if Sam had continued with his martial arts studies.

The stick whipped out and Sam easily blocked the blow. He followed with a strike of his own. He was large, with a muscularity that drove the sticks with great force. He also had reach on Lazarus. Lazarus was incredibly quick, though, and his blows were very precise. His strength was in his forearms, the result of millennia of using weapons, and he was able to divert the force of the blows that Sam delivered. They moved at full speed and force, relying on each other's mastery of the weapons to avoid injury. The sticks slammed against each other in a staccato rhythm. The rhythm sped up as they enjoyed the competition. Soon, they were both surrounded by a cloud of mist as their bodies heated up in the cold air.

The staccato sound of Eskrima sticks echoed off of the surrounding buildings, and drew observers. Faces looked out windows from adjacent buildings, watching the competition. As the sound penetrated into the street, kids came around back to see what was going on. Several boys and two girls watched as the men tried to best each other. Soon, everybody in the neighborhood was rooting for their home boy.

Breath frosted through the air as chests heaved from exertion. The sticks were moving so fast that the crowd could only see a blur. Sweat coated them, soaking t-shirts. Suddenly, a mistake was made and a stick whipped forward to tag Sam in the stomach. Lazarus pulled the hit so that he wouldn't hurt Sam.

Sam stepped back, leaning towards the side that had been struck. Catcalls followed as he stepped away from Lazarus. He glowered at the faces in the brownstones, "Hey, if you think it's easy, come on down and try your luck!"

The heads pulled back into the windows, nobody willing to take up the challenge. One of the girls asked, "Sam, are you going to do that again? Can we watch?"

He looked at the little girl, "Sarah, you're always welcome to watch. But I think we're done for today, sweetheart. Maybe next time."

The children looked disappointed. They wandered back to the street in front of the brownstones to find something else to occupy their interests. Sam leaned back against the fence, "So, old man, I guess you haven't lost your touch."

Lazarus didn't want to tighten up, so he kept moving, "You aren't too bad either. I guess you kept up your studies since I saw you last."

Sam nodded, "Yeah, I took your advice and stuck to Krav Maga and Filipino Eskrima. I like to do a bit of Brazilian Jujitsu as well."

"It's done you well. Your stick work is much better. You're faster, and you're able to anticipate my moves."

Sam smiled at the praise from his mentor. Lazarus motioned towards the back door of Sam's house, "What say we go in before we start cooling down too much. If we can avoid a cold, I say we do so."

Sam gathered up his coat and shirt while Lazarus grabbed the ironwood sticks. They walked up the stairs and into the house.

Lazarus put the sticks on the kitchen table and picked up a towel that he laid out previously. He toweled the sweat off his body. Sam moved past him to his bedroom, hung up his coat and dumped his shirt and t-shirt into the plastic hamper in his closet. He walked into the bathroom and grabbed a towel to wipe the sweat off. He walked past Lazarus, grabbed the towel from him and walked into the laundry room and dumped both towels into the washing machine.

From the kitchen, Lazarus asked, "Did you get the directions to the first pickup?"

Sam walked back into the kitchen, "Yeah, I got the directions from the dead drop. Our first stop is in the Poconos. We have to wire the money to their offshore account tonight, and it'll be there, waiting for us. I gave them a city in the general direction, and they have the four caches geo-located. Each location will be available as we pick up a cache, then wire the next set of money."

Lazarus was impressed, once again, by his protégé, "Do you have a pistol? As soon as we get out of New York, I think we need to carry."

Sam pulled out two of the ubiquitous Labatt's Canadian Ales, popped the tops, and sat one in front of Lazarus, "We can do that. My Springfield XDM is hidden downstairs. I have extra magazines, if you need some. And, I have my concealed carry license for the pistol."

Lazarus shook his head, "No, I have plenty, but we're going to have to exchange your regular bullets for my frangible ones." He paused, "How did you get your concealed carry? You live in New York. I thought concealed carry was only available for the politically connected."

Sam sat down in the chair across from Lazarus, "Yeah, well, I became a Florida resident. My uncle has a house down there, so I use that as my address now. That way I can have a concealed carry license to use outside of New York, and I don't have to worry about state income taxes. Basically a win-win for me, though the property taxes here still rip me apart."

Lazarus looked at Sam. When he met him ten years ago, Sam wasn't what you would call a worldly individual. Things like tax shelters were not high on his list of things to know. Lazarus approved of the changes, "Good choice."

Sam took a drink, "So, about the concealed carry. Expecting trouble so soon?"

Lazarus mirrored his movements and felt the cool liquid slide down his throat, "Not from Lilith. That would violate the parameters of our working agreement. I think that her boss wouldn't understand too well if she broke our agreement this quickly. We can expect her to make her move shortly after we deal with the incursion, though, if not during." He took another drink, "But, she might spread the word around. If others found out, they might do her dirty work for her."

Sam smiled, "And since we have to deal with nefarious individuals to procure our supplies, you think we may have to deal with problems along the way."

"Yes. Unfortunately, sometimes word travels even when you wish it wouldn't. I have no doubt that Lilith will be using her influence to track us the entire way."

But, better safe than sorry. Sometimes, it's not primeval immorality and evil you have to worry about. Sometimes it's just a thug with a gun. Better to be able to deal with the situation instead of standing there flat footed, looking foolish before he kills you."

Sam understood. As a Marine and an iron worker, he understood about risk management and mitigating the vagaries of chance and other people's poor, or malicious, choices. Besides, with the amount of hardware they'd be carrying on this particular mission, somebody may want a big score. There were a lot of gangs that would literally kill to get their hands on the weapons that he and Lazarus acquired along the way.

Still, if there was going to be trouble, there was no better man to face it with than Lazarus. Sam had faced the minions of hell with him. Lazarus would always have his back, California notwithstanding. Sam was yanking Lazarus' chain when he mentioned California. In fact, he was proud that Lazarus had such a good opinion about his capabilities that he didn't worry about Sam dealing with the three lycans on his own. Dealt with them he had indeed.

It was unfortunate that there had been a group of state police and California National Guard cutting down marijuana plants not five miles away from where the big battle against the vampire coven and their lycan body guards occurred. He had to run three miles across rough terrain, to the old Ford Bronco, to get clear of the area. Then he had to drive through pitted logging roads until he was able to get to Nevada. All of the weapons were sold to a survivalist in Reno for a reduced sum of money, and the Bronco was left with the keys in it in a bad part of Las Vegas. The survivalist wasn't stupid. Those weapons wouldn't see the light of day until the apocalypse, whenever that might be.

Sam asked, "When do you want to get on the road?"

Lazarus replied, setting the empty bottle down on the table, "Well, I'd like to pay a visit to Myra before I leave. But I want to get to the first site pretty quick."

Sam nodded, "When you go to see Myra, give her my respects."

Lazarus smiled at the idea, "Sure."

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He stopped at a flower shop and bought a dozen red roses, and took a bus cross town. Along the way, women smiled to see him with the flowers, thinking that he was going to see his girlfriend or his wife. He was, though they didn't understand the circumstances. He just smiled back at them. He got off the bus at the gates of Union Field Cemetery, a Jewish cemetery between Queens and Brooklyn. He walked through the gates, and calm replaced the bustle outside. As far as the eye could see there were Stars of David on the monuments. He took in the dignified monuments, well-tended lawn and the trees turning scarlet and orange. The quiet of the cemetery made him thoughtful. The chill from the morning remained.

As he walked, he looked at the row numbers to find the one that he wanted. The area he was looking for was older. Myra Rothstein had passed in 1964. He met her in 1920, just after the passing of the Volstead Act. Myra was related to Arnold Rothstein, the Jewish racketeer, which was, in a roundabout way, how Lazarus met her. At least, the second time he met her.

When Lazarus came to New York, it was to talk to Arnold Rothstein. One of his earners was dealing with demonic powers. Joey Donovan wasn't happy just being an earner, he wanted to be the big boss. Joey didn't have the talent to rise above his station, though. The only way Donovan could ever get into that position was with a little help.

While Rothstein was a reprehensible human being, dealing in numbers, prostitution and anything else he could get his hooks into, he wasn't dealing with demonic powers to feed his corruption. Rothstein was safe from Lazarus. Lazarus doubted Rothstein would be standing at the right hand of God when the time came, but Rothstein wasn't his problem.

Donovan wasn't as lucky. Lazarus couldn't get to him without going through Rothstein, though. Donovan was not a smart man, but he was brutal enough to be a good earner for Rothstein. It was much more trouble trying to get to Donovan without Rothstein's permission than with it.

Money talks, so Lazarus posed as a wealthy business man from Israel, which, in a way, he was. Still, he pressed flesh and greased palms, and got to a place where he and Rothstein could talk. He brought evidence that Donovan was creeping up on Rothstein, some of it real, some of it fake. Rothstein bit, and let him go after Donovan.

In the process, he met Myra, Rothstein's cousin. Rothstein was one of the main men in organized crime in New York City. Strangely though, Myra was considered to be the black sheep of the family. The difference was, Arnold Rothstein was a Jewish man, and Myra Rothstein was Jewish woman. She was also a free spirit. She was an actress and a singer. She didn't want the staid life of a Jewish wife and mother. She was much happier taking part of the wilder side of New York life.

The first time he met her was in a speakeasy in Brooklyn. He didn't know she was related to Arnold Rothstein, and she didn't pay any attention to him. She spilt her drink on him, and snarled at him for getting in her way. He was amused by the dark haired beauty, but he had other interests that night.

Rothstein and Lazarus met at an upscale restaurant a few weeks later. The restaurant had a very exclusive clientele. Lazarus saw her walk in, and once again he was struck by her beauty. She walked in on the arm of a Protestant that Rothstein knew, and Arnold was not happy at all. He stood up, walked over to the couple, and said something to the man. The man's face blanched, and he quickly left Myra with Arnold, saying, "I'm sorry Mr. Rothstein, it won't happen again."

After the Protestant left, Arnold talked, and Myra listened. Myra tried to argue with him, but he wasn't having any of it. The smile she walked in with disappeared, and was replaced with a frown and sullen silence. Rothstein led her over to the table where Lazarus was sitting. Rothstein pointed at a chair and said, "Sit."

Arnold retook his seat, and introduced her, "Please, let me introduce my cousin, Myra."

Myra tried to ignore Lazarus, rolling her eyes. Lazarus smiled at her petulance. He spoke, "Sorry, Mr. Rothstein, that won't be necessary. Your cousin and I have already met."

She was startled, and Arnold was curious. "And where did you two meet, Mr. Bethany?"

Lazarus smiled at her, “At the Bedford Nest, in Brooklyn. We were partaking in, ah, some libations of a liberating sort, and Myra here decided to not only pour her drink on me, but also to disparage me for being in her way when she did so.”

Myra’s eyes widened, “Hey, I remember you! You knocked the drink out of my hand.”

Lazarus shook his head, “No, I was standing there, and you turned and spilled your drink on my suit.”

Myra poked him in the arm, “No, I don’t think so! It wasn’t like that! I wasn’t the one moving, you were.”

They continued talking. Rothstein was ephemeral at that point, and he could see what was happening. He didn’t care, since Lazarus, or Eli as he knew him, was Jewish, and rich. That alone would keep Myra’s mother, his aunt, happy, and by extension, him also, since he didn’t have to listen to her kvetch about her daughter.

Myra and Lazarus hit it off. Lazarus asked for Rothstein’s permission to escort her home from the restaurant. Myra didn’t like that. When Rothstein left, he got an earful from her. They argued. They argued as they ordered desert. They argued as he paid the tab. They argued as he walked her home. They argued as he walked her to her apartment. They argued as she opened the door. Once he was inside, there was no more arguing until morning. Lazarus fell deeply in love with her.

The wedding was huge, much bigger than Lazarus wanted. He had no choice though, marrying Rothstein’s cousin. Lazarus had the time of his life with Myra. They had an apartment not far from the theater district. He thought of the times when they walked naked through the apartment, listening to Jazz records, learning to play guitar, talking about the New York intellectual writers that were exploring Marxism. She thought they were deep and original thinkers. He thought they were deluded.

A lot of the Cotton Club regulars spent time at their apartment. She became a well-known painter, and patron of the arts. He didn’t even have to contribute money to the relationship. She established a following and was able to sell quite a few of her pieces. He never cared about that, and she didn’t either. It was something to keep her occupied when he wasn’t there. When he was there, they had each other, and that was their entire world.

Now, fifty years later, he thought about her often. He loved everything she did. Later in life, she lived in SoHo. Always the innovator, she moved there in the mid-’50s, and more artists followed her. She eventually learned the truth, but she didn’t care. As she grew older, he stopped leaving to spend precious time with her. He had responsibilities, but he put them aside to stay with her. Their age drew them apart, at least physically, her mortality and his immortality putting a wedge between them. There was always the understanding, the kindness, the deep love between them, though, even as time drew them apart. Now, when he was in New York, he always paid his respects.

He found the monument, in the shade of an ancient oak tree. He touched it, and his fingertips lingered on the letters of her name. He brushed the few fallen leaves away, and placed the roses on the ground in front of the monument. He sighed. “Ah, Myra, my love, I still miss you girl. Oh, and Sam said hello.”

He stood there for fifteen minutes, updating her on what he had done since the last time he had talked to her. He wished he could take back the years, and feel her breath on his skin, taste her kisses, laugh with her, make love to her. He knew, though, that all things come to an end. Hopefully, one day, they would meet again. He finished by kissing his fingertips, then touching the monument.

Too soon, the world intruded on his reminiscence. As he stood there, a man walked up and stood next to him. He looked over and recognized him, or, more exactly, he recognized the type. Sometimes it was hard to differentiate between them. The Archangel was well dressed, though with little flash, dark suit, dark coat, white shirt, brushed oxford shoes, no jewelry.

The leaves rustled around the man as a small breeze sprung up. The clothes didn't move with the wind. The features were subtly wrong, though. No human could ever look like that. The man was startling handsome, achingly so. White hair, eyes so blue they looked like glacier ice, and pale, very pale, skin. The light blue tie matched the eyes. The thing that stood out, though, was the flawless complexion of the skin, no dimples, no scars, no pores; also, no smile.

"What's up, Uriel? Or is it Michael? Hard to tell you guys apart sometime."

He didn't get a reply. Lazarus knew who it was. There was a problem, if Uriel was here now. Angels don't, as a general practice, come down to talk to mortals. That would be problematic. Angels are not known for being especially loquacious. They usually smite something, and then they're gone again. Lazarus motioned towards the monument with Myra's name on it.

"You know, it's usually considered to impolite to bother a man when he is talking to his loved ones, especially when he's standing at their grave."

Uriel stood there, watching him. Archangels don't get sarcasm.

Lazarus spoke, "So, there's something you need to tell me?"

Uriel nodded. He didn't say anything though, which was a good thing. When angels speak, multitudes die. Lazarus was pretty sure that the last time an angel said anything, it resulted in the ten plagues that hit Egypt. It was like charades, only without the hand gestures and silly faces. Lazarus had to fill in the blanks, which meant it was going to be a one sided conversation.

Lazarus thought about Lilith and the situation. He ran the scenario through his mind. He picked up on something, "How do you know that an incursion is going to happen, if it's from outside our universe? Do you have some kind of source? Or is it just the 'God, omniscient, omnipotent thing?'"

Uriel shook his head.

Lazarus kept pulling at the string, trying to unravel the mystery, "so, if you don't have a source, and the boss didn't tell you, then you must have known from something that's happened in our reality?"

Uriel nodded.

Lazarus knew that these guys had a handle on everything that happened in this reality. They had all of creation to worry about, to make sure things were proceeding according to plan. If they didn't know about it, it wasn't happening. Still, to understand what was happening, if there wasn't a source outside, then something here had to have tipped them off. Understanding grew as he puzzled it out.

“Something has already happened. Something, or someone from there is already here?”

Uriel shook his head.

Lazarus continued, “Maybe you’re telling me, they aren’t here, but they have some influence here.”

Uriel nodded.

Lazarus thought about the implications. Not only did he have to worry about alien beings establishing a beach head in his reality, he had to worry about Lilith and her group of evil misfits. Now he had worry about a third entity, a stalking horse coming at him from an unknown angle.

Lazarus cursed. His life was beginning to become very complicated. He didn’t like complicated. He preferred it uncomplicated. He preferred, “There are the evil demons and their minions. Kill the evil demons and their minions.” Uncomplicated like that, he could deal with. Hell, he could stumble along on cruise control when things were that uncomplicated.

Uriel put his hand on Lazarus’ shoulder.

“I shouldn’t curse, I know,” Lazarus laughed, “I may be immortal, but I’m only human. You put a lot on my shoulders.”

Uriel reached out for the Crucifix and Star of David that Lazarus wore on a chain around his neck. As he touched it, Lazarus looked down. The hand was gone by the time he looked, and when he looked back up, Uriel was gone. There were two lingering thoughts. The first was, “You have broad shoulders.” The second was, “Protect the innocent.”

A wry smile slipped across Lazarus’ face. Then he frowned, and thought, “This is way above my paygrade. This is archangel smiting the unholy. If they need me to take care of this, what other issues are they dealing with?”

Lazarus was worried. He needed to make a few phone calls.

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They began early the next morning. Sam went to the parking garage and got his Dodge Ram and drove it over the night before. They got up, ate breakfast, and packed anything they hadn’t packed the day before. Sam had his cousin Morgan, a dainty, lovely woman who didn’t look anything like the lumbering hulk her cousin was, to come over and take care of Mooch and to watch the house. She had beautiful, delicate features. The only thing that linked them as cousins was the dark, thick hair they shared.

Sam began going through the list of things that Morgan needed to do while he was gone. Then he gave her a potential date that he would be back. As Sam was talking, Mooch came over and began rubbing on Morgan’s legs, meowing for a snack. Morgan picked him up and cooed over him, but Mooch was his own man. If he wasn’t getting a snack, he wasn’t going to be held. He wriggled until she put him back down.

“Why do I get that from every man I meet?” she asked.

Lazarus stepped up, “Because, evidently, the men you’re dating are idiots.”

Morgan smiled at him, “Well, you might have a point there.” She looked at Sam, “Where’d you get this guy, Sam?”

Sam spoke up, "Eli, that's my cousin, Morgan. Morgan, this is my friend Eli. Eli and I have done some work together in the past."

Sam pointed at Lazarus, "He's off limits to you."

Morgan put her hand on her hip, "Since when do you have a say in who I do, or who I don't, go out with?"

Sam held his hands up in defense, "All I have to say about that is one word – Donny. Was I right, or was I right?"

Morgan crossed her arms, "Okay, you were right that one time, but that doesn't mean you get to tell me who I go out with."

Sam shook his head, "Oh no, don't get me started. How many times have I had to come get you because the stiff you went out with treated you like garbage? Remember Dimitri?"

Morgan stomped her foot, "Look, you aren't my father, you aren't my mother, you aren't my big brother. You don't get to tell me anything."

"No, you're right. I'm not your father, I'm not your mother, and I'm not your big brother. I'm the guy that, night or day, whenever you call, comes to find you," He put his hands on her shoulders and pulled her in to his chest, and kissed her on top of her head. She cuddled in for the big hug.

He pulled away after a minute, "Now, I'm not going to be in town for a few weeks maybe. If there are any problems, you go to cousin Bobby, okay? He'll step in and take care of you, or, if there's a problem with the house, he'll take care of it for me. I got him on retainer to take care of this stuff, okay?"

Lazarus enjoyed the byplay between the two cousins. He stepped forward, grabbed her hand, and kissed it, gently.

"Oh, wow, and he's got manners as well."

Sam shook his head, poked Lazarus, grabbed a duffle bag and slung it over his shoulder. He turned and walked out the front door. Lazarus grabbed his duffle, and followed him. He turned to Morgan, "it was a pleasure meeting you."

Before Lazarus could make it out the door, Morgan grabbed his shoulder, and pulled him around to talk to him. Morgan spoke, just loud enough for Lazarus to hear, "You better bring him back in one peace, okay? I'll come lookin' for you if you don't."

He smiled at her, "I promise." He closed the door behind him so that Mooch wouldn't get out.

Morgan was no dummy. She knew her cousin very well. Sam would work on the high rises for a while, but then he'd get that far away look in his eye. He wouldn't be able to concentrate, and he'd start talking about the different places he'd been. Sam loved his life, he loved his family, but sometimes, Brooklyn closed in on him and became too restrictive. Then he would leave and do something else for a while. His family understood that about him. He was a restless soul since the thing with Mikey. They knew that their Don Quixote had to go out and tilt at windmills once in a while. They didn't ask, they just made sure he had a home to come back to.

Morgan walked over and sat down on the couch. Mooch hopped up on the couch beside her, and looked at her. She looked back. Mooch crawled over, began kneading her leg, then curled up on her lap. He rolled over and exposed his stomach so that she could rub it.

“Yeah, you little faker. I’m gonna miss him as well. Just you and me for the next few weeks, huh?”

Outside, Sam slung his duffle into the bed of the truck. The truck was a crew cab, like most men in the trades drove. It had a camper over the bed of the truck. Lazarus dropped his duffle onto the bed as well. Sam closed the camper cover and locked it. He got behind the wheel of the truck, and unlocked the passenger door. Lazarus climbed in, and Sam fired up the diesel. They began the drive out of New York.

Lazarus was sure that he preferred the prospect of being betrayed by demons to soul eating aliens than face the horrors of NYC rush hour traffic. Luckily, they were headed out of the city, and most commuters were driving in, so things didn’t go as badly as he thought they would. Sam was a pro, knew the city like the back of his hand, and Lazarus settled back to watch life in New York pass by.

Chapter 5

A Game of Tag in the Poconos.

The drive to the Poconos was uneventful. It took longer to get out of New York City than it did to get there. As they drove, Lazarus thought more about the visit from Uriel. Sam noticed that there was something on Lazarus’ mind. He let Lazarus stew for a bit, then asked, “So, what’s eating you?”

“This, all of this,” he replied.

“What, all of this? Isn’t this what you do?”

Lazarus shook his head, “Not like this. This isn’t what I’ve been doing for the last two thousand years.”

Sam shrugged, “I don’t see what the problem is.”

Lazarus crossed his arms, “Really? How can you not? This isn’t normal. They ask us to work with demons. And, from what I was told, we’re using them against something that’s just as evil. That’s my problem. I don’t see the upside to any of this.”

“Maybe it’s the idea of an enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

Lazarus turned to look at Sam, “Good and evil can never be friends, or even allies. Besides, aren’t you the one that said we should just kill Lilith and be done with it?”

Sam nodded his head, “Yeah, I did. I admit that.”

“So what, now you’re okay with working with Lilith to stop this,” he circled his hand like he was conjuring up magic, “incursion from another reality?”

Sam took his right hand off the wheel, and wagged a finger in the air, “Oh no, I’m not okay with any of this. Not at all. But I do see an upside to the situation.”

Lazarus frowned, “What’s the upside?”

Sam smiled, “First, we’ll know where Lilith is.”

Lazarus nodded, wondering where Sam’s logic was going.

Sam continued, “Second, we know that Lilith is going to try and kill us, yes?”

Lazarus kept quiet and let Sam continue.

“So, we know that she’s probably going to bring a lot of backup. Because, let’s face it, she isn’t going to put her ass on the line when it comes down to it.”

Lazarus nodded.

A big smile splayed across Sam’s face, “Which means that we’ll probably be surrounded, not only by Lilith and her evil minions, but also by the evil beasts that are going to spill across from some unholy dimension. That means, it’s you and me, surrounded by unmitigated evil on all sides,” he glanced at Lazarus, “yes?”

Lazarus had a bemused look on his face, “And this is a good thing, how?”

“Are you kidding me? As far as the eye can see, it’s gonna be targets! Everything is a target. Hell, this is awesome. Can you imagine how much demonic blood we’re probably going to spill? Unmitigated, absolute evil concentrated in one spot, waiting for us to take them out. Talk about a once in a lifetime opportunity.”

Lazarus was dismayed. He looked at Sam with concern, “Ah, big guy, I’m not sure that’s a good thing. Are you okay? Do you have a fever?”

Sam looked over at the expression on Lazarus’ face, and began laughing, tears rolling down his face. He was laughing so hard that Lazarus was afraid Sam would drive off the road.

“Oh, man, the look on your face. Oh, that’s absolutely precious. I wish I had a camera to take a picture of that face.”

Lazarus shook his head at his friend’s obvious dementia, “You my friend, are seriously disturbed.”

“What’s the matter, Eli? You don’t like to laugh anymore?”

“No, it’s not that. I think this thing’s more complicated than we were initially led to believe.”

Sam frowned, “What, working with a demon to fight evil from outside the universe isn’t complicated enough?”

Lazarus looked out the side window, at the countryside, “Evidently not. There might be third party involvement on this side of the equation.”

Sam’s expression went from humorous to serious, “What third party?”

“Think about it. How did my guys, the good guys, know that this was happening?”

Sam shrugged, “All powerful, all knowing.”

Lazarus shook his head, “No, or, at least that’s not the intel I’m getting from Uriel.”

A dumbfounded expression look appeared on Sam’s face. The pickup truck swerved as Sam took his eyes off the road to look at Lazarus, “Seriously. Are you kidding me? Uriel, an archangel, came down from heaven, and told you that there was a third party involved in all of this.”

Lazarus shrugged. He pointed at the road that Sam was ignoring. Sam got the hint and looked forward.

Sam shook his head in consternation, “Okay, I get the, ‘Redeemer laid his hands on me and I arose from the dead.’ I can handle that in a somewhat abstract way. But dude, a direct line to heaven?”

Lazarus waved that away, “It doesn’t happen often. Last time was a few hundred years ago.”

Sam frowned, "You and I need to have a serious talk sometime. There are a few things that you and I need to discuss."

"Such as?" Lazarus asked.

"Such as the, brought back from the dead, fought demonic evil for two thousand years, have intimate knowledge of demons and angels. Hell, you probably know more about the way the universe works than the Vatican or the people at CERN."

Lazarus looked away, "Maybe."

Sam frowned, "In light of what you're telling me, I think we should be a bit more circumspect when we go into check on the first cache."

Lazarus thought about it, "Yeah, I see your point. Without knowing anything about this possible third party, we should be more careful."

And the bad guys just keep piling on, Sam thought for a moment. "Well, there is one upside to all of this."

"What's that?"

"We don't have to worry about an innocent being in the way. I was right about that. Seems we'll have bad guys 360 degrees."

The conversation subsided. Lazarus was unhappy as he thought about that last statement, *There is that at least*.

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It was just before noon when they got close to the first site. Sam pulled over at a restaurant. A light mist was starting to fall.

"What's up?" Lazarus asked.

Sam smiled, "Recon time."

"What, you don't want to just drive up to the cache site and hope that we don't have any uninvited guests?"

Sam shook his head, "I think you know me better than that." He pulled out a topographical map of the area, and began pointing out where the cache was, and how they would have to drive into the cache site.

"So, you want both of us to go in and have a sneak and peak before we drive in?"

Sam shook his head, "No, I think I can handle this one. If you look here, this is the obvious, and only way that we can get a vehicle into the cache site."

He pointed out a logging road that ran towards the valley where the cache was. The valley was flanked on both sides by two spurs off of a ridge.

"If I was wantin' to take us out, I'd have a team, maybe two, of snipers in the bushes, waitin' for coordinated shots at us. That way, they can kill us both at the exact same time. No place to hide if both sides of the car are covered."

Lazarus conceded Sam's logic.

Sam continued, "So, I'm thinkin' that one team would be right here, and the other would be right around here."

"What do you want to do about them?" Lazarus asked.

"Well, I think that if I come in from the backside, over here, I could go in and take a look around and see if I see them, before they see me. I could go in over here, and then you could drive around the opening of the valley, say, in three hours, to give me a distraction to use against them."

Lazarus thought about the plan. It was a good plan, but he would prefer to back Sam up in the woods. Sam was good in the woods, though. There was no better stalker for this kind of work.

Stalking was not for the faint hearted. It took a special skill set to move silently through the woods without being seen or heard. Stalking wasn't something that was taught in the military, at least not to the regular infantry. Too often, leaders were more interested in getting their infantry to a certain location by a certain time, leading to the phrase, "movement to contact."

Movement to contact just meant that the infantry walked until somebody started shooting at them. Then they would react against whoever and wherever the shooting began. The problem was, of course, the first guy gets shot at; if it was a well thought out ambush, he usually didn't walk away from the initial contact.

Stalking was a different skill set, though. Stalking involved an understanding of the psychology of your enemy and woods skills to find your targets. In this case, that would be the team or teams of snipers that might be in the woods waiting for them. Stalking was a slow, laborious process. Quick movement would get a man killed in that environment. Anything that attracted the eye, or made a sound would get you killed just as quickly.

Lazarus nodded, but said, "Okay, we can do it your way, but I'd feel better if you let the rain work its magic for a while. Plus, I think it would be better for you if you wait until visibility decreases, maybe after the sun goes down."

Sam thought about it, "Yeah, okay, we can do that. There's a small Econolodge we can set up at. I can move out of there, and you can watch TV until it's time for you to cause the distraction."

"You brought night vision goggles?" Lazarus asked.

Sam grinned, "Of course. What good Marine would go anywhere without NVGs. It's the latest in fashion trends."

Lazarus smiled, and nodded, "Okay, let's go."

Sam started the Dodge, and they went to the Econolodge. The Econolodge had seen better days. It was run down, and there were only a few cars out front. The manager was surprised to see them, but quickly took their money for the two adjoining rooms. Lazarus made sure the rooms were at the back, close to the woods so that Sam could slip out without being seen.

They pulled out their duffle bags and took them into the rooms. When they got inside, Sam pulled out everything he would need for the night time reconnaissance. He had light boots, multicam pants and shirt. He had a boonie cap in the same camouflage pattern. He pulled out camo cream for his face.

There was multicam gortex for the rain, but he didn't want to use that for the stalk. The swish of the material moving back and forth would give him away. It was going to be a wet night, but it would only be for a few hours. He would be cold and wet, but better cold and wet, than dry and dead.

He pulled out a Heckler and Koch MP5 in 9mm. The weapon was made for this kind of situation. It was silenced for the subsonic 9mm rounds he was using, and the action was buffered so that the sound of the bullets cycling through couldn't be heard. It was the perfect tool for in close wet work. He could quickly dispatch one team then move to the other team. The only thing that he had to worry about was the flash of the gunshots.

It was a few hours before he had to go out, and he was going to be out late, so he decided to take a nap. He racked out, and Lazarus was set to wake him an hour before it was time for the recon. Lazarus went back to his room, turned on the TV, and watched for a while before he became hungry. He took the pickup truck out and bought some hamburgers from a local shack and brought them back to the Econolodge. He bought four of them, knowing that Sam would be hungry when he woke. Lazarus tried one, and it was actually pretty good. The fries sucked though. He wash it down with a coke. The first was so good, he decided to eat another, saving the other two for Sam.

The hours passed. He kept looking at his watch, but time was dragging. Finally, he looked at his watch, and it was time. He walked next door, and banged on Sam's door. Sam opened the door and turned back into the room. Lazarus followed him in. He sat the bag with the burgers on the table.

"What's this?"

"Dinner. I hope you like cheeseburgers."

"Who doesn't like cheeseburgers?" Sam asked. He pulled out one of the burgers and unwrapped it. It was lukewarm, but it was better than nothing. He took a bite, "Hey, not bad."

"Yeah, but the fries suck."

Sam tried one, "Yeah, you're right, they do suck."

Lazarus noticed that didn't keep Sam from eating the rest of them. The coke disappeared quickly as well.

Sam began getting dressed. "How cold is it?" he asked.

"In the low fifties. It'll be colder by the time you finish."

Sam nodded, "No problem. That'll be perfect. Is it still raining?"

Lazarus shook his head, "No, it stopped raining about an hour ago. Just enough to make everything wet out there.

Sam smiled, "Good. That should keep the noise down."

A look of concern crossed Lazarus' face, "Sam, are you sure you want to do it this way? I can go out as well."

Sam shook his head, "Naw, don't worry. If they're out there, I'll deal with it." He noticed the look on Lazarus' face, "Don't worry, Mom. If they have rear security, or I think there's too many, I'll sneak back out, and we'll figure out something else. That's if there's even anyone out there."

Sam added a kabar knife to his kit, a multicam camalbak, and a gunslinger pouch that had extra magazines in it. It also had a radio in it to call Lazarus. He put the starlight monocular on.

"Okay, I'm ready."

Lazarus walked to door, and opened it. He stepped outside, pulled the door closed to keep anyone from seeing inside, and stretched. He walked down the sidewalk, then walked back to the room, looking around. There was no one moving outside. They couldn't be seen from the office. Lazarus opened the door, stepped back to the room, and snapped his fingers. Sam ran directly out of the room to the woods. He was inside the wood line in less than two seconds. As soon as he entered the wood line, he couldn't be seen. Lazarus closed the door and waited.

Sam made it to the tree line, and walked into the tree line away from the edge. He walked in about thirty feet. He crouched down to look and listen, to see if there was anything moving. He dropped the monocular over his non-firing eye, and turned it on. He had an infrared laser on the MP5, but he didn't want to use it unless he had to. If there was somebody out there with NVGs, the laser would give Sam's position away.

When he was satisfied he was alone, he walked slowly, getting used to the sound and smell of the forest around him. The pine needles were quiet under his feet as he walked, the rain water soaking everything so that there was no crackle left in the vegetation. He walked quietly and slowly, testing every step before he put his full weight down. He made slow time, but he was very quiet. He fell into a rhythm and soon he was a ghost among the trees. He moved from the shadow of one tree to another, avoiding clearings, allowing him to blend into the darkness.

It took him a long time to move to the area he was interested in. Stalking took time, the slower the better to ensure that you saw or heard the other person first. Stalking was a very deliberate skill. The stalker had to be patient.

It took him an hour to get to the area. He began his sweep along the top of the ridge. He moved even slower while making the sweep, looking for anything out of the ordinary. He was looking for something that wasn't natural, something that would stand out. As he walked, he noticed that there was no rear security. So, either there wasn't anybody up there, or they weren't very professional. Still, he didn't let down his guard. He kept moving.

It took him a while, but then he saw the shooter stretched out on the ground. The shooter had made one very tiny, but very important mistake. He was wearing vibram soled boots. It said so, on the bottom of his boot, with a big yellow rectangle. Sam looked around, looking for the sniper's spotter. Usually sniper's operated in teams of two, a sniper and spotter. The spotter served two purposes. One, the spotter helped the sniper figure out range, elevation, and wind. Second, he acted as the sniper's security, so that the sniper could concentrate on making the shot.

Sam waited. He listened. He looked. He didn't see a second person anywhere. He moved closer. Now he was taking a step every twenty seconds. When the sniper shifted, he would freeze in position, sometimes staying there for a full minute, looking and listening. Eventually, he closed to within ten feet of the shooter. Sam began to worry. He was worried the shooter would sense him. Sam had to think about what he did next. He could shoot, and possibly give away the fact that he was hunting the shooters. The muzzle flash would illuminate the surrounding vegetation, giving him away if there was a second or third team. Or he could use the knife, and hope that sounds of the struggle didn't give him away. With the wet vegetation, and since there was only one shooter, he really had no choice. That gave him the edge when it came to stealth.

Sam slowly shifted the MP5 to his back, and pulled the Kabar from the sheath. The guy was lying chest to the ground, his back to Sam, and he was only ten feet away. That was two, maybe three steps, then Sam would be on top of him. Sam took a deep breath, and rushed forward. He landed on top of the shooter, and stabbed down with the knife. The shooter struggled against the sudden weight on his back. Sam heard the rush of air as he landed and drove the air from the

shooter's lungs. He stabbed until he felt the shooter go slack. Then he cut the shooter's throat.

He knelt down, feeling around the shooter, not willing to use a light. There was blood everywhere, but he found what he was looking for. The shooter was wearing a microphone strapped to his throat, and had an ear piece in his ear. Sam felt around and found the line that ran to the radio on the shooter's harness. So, there were at least two, possibly more shooters in the area.

Sam stopped and listened. He listened for movement. He waited for ten minutes, and didn't hear or see anybody. He pulled out his radio, and very quietly said, "One down."

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Lazarus waited for three hours, to give Sam time to clear the area. Around two hours, he heard Sam say, "One down," over the handheld radio. This meant that, yes there was an ambush in place, and there was more than one shooter, or sniper team, out there. Now it was time for him to do his part. He climbed into the Dodge, and cranked the engine. He put it in gear, and drove out to the logging road. He took his time and drove slowly, pretending he didn't know where he was going and didn't know where to turn. He had to play this right, to give Sam a chance to take care of whatever problems he might find out there.

The road was wet and the gravel loose with mud. He put the pickup truck into four wheel drive. He turned the bright lights on, to saturate the area with light. He hoped that the bright lights might blind the shooters. He found the side road that he needed, but drove past it, trying to give Sam more time. He drove past about a mile, then turned around, and drove back.

Lazarus was conflicted. He hadn't heard anything from Sam. He didn't know if he would be driving into a trap. For all he knew, Sam was dead and bleeding in the forest. He stopped at the entrance to the side road. He thought for a minute, and made a decision: no guts, no glory. He would rely on Sam's capabilities. He turned onto the side road, and drove into the valley.

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Sam spent the better part of an hour searching for the second sniper. He knew the guy was out here. It wasn't just the radio that Sam found that indicated this to him. It was also an instinct that Sam had developed over the years. There were only two places the guy could have set up for the shot. The other shooter had to be in place to cover the other side of any vehicle that drove into the valley. Sam covered the first area, but he didn't find anything. There was always the possibility that the second shooter had heard the first kill and was now hunting Sam. Sam was cautious, but that was always a possibility. Carefully, but understanding that his time was running out, he made his way to the second possible position.

This guy was much better at hiding than the other shooter. Sam was having a bear of a time finding him. There was nothing artificial, no straight lines, nothing he could find. He didn't see any movement, didn't hear anything. Then it drifted to him on the wind. It was something most guys didn't think about. Hell, most guys didn't need to think about it. Sam thought about it, though. Little things like that were important when your life was on the line. That was why everything he used

was scent free. He didn't like to use any kind of products that had a smell to it. Out here in the woods, smell can give away your position. It smelled like shampoo, or soap. It was faint, but the breeze carried it to him.

Sam saw the lights of the Dodge bouncing down the logging road. He was out of time. He thought he knew where the shooter was, but he wasn't positive. He could smell him, but he didn't have an exact location.

Sam watched as the Dodge drove past the road to the valley. He breathed out, knowing that this was just a short reprieve. He watched the lights turn around and start heading back. Things were not going well. He watched the Dodge stop. He knew what Lazarus was thinking. Do I turn in, or do I drive out. Lazarus didn't know if Sam had gotten the last of the shooters, or if the shooters had gotten him.

He watched the Dodge turn onto the side road. The bright lights were on, making it hard to see who was behind the wheel. The lights played across the side of the ridge.

Sam saw something out of the corner of his eye. He wasn't sure it was real, and he didn't want to move too quickly. He hoped that the shooter was preoccupied with what Lazarus was doing on the valley floor. The Dodge stopped, and the door opened. Lazarus climbed out, standing behind the door. He cupped his hands around his mouth. He stood behind the lights, which made his form indistinct to Sam and the sniper on the ridge.

Lazarus yelled, "Hey, Sam, did you kill the snipers yet?"

Sam heard the sniper curse. Instantly, he snapped the MP5 up into the firing position and began shooting. The bullets shredded the sniper's camouflage netting. The sound of the bullets hitting flesh were punctuated by the grunts of the dying man. Sam walked over to him. The man cursed him, in several languages. He stood on the dying man's neck to help him on his way. Weak hands slapped at his feet and legs. Soon, there were no more curses.

Sam pulled out his radio, "You crazy bastard. Yeah, I found them both. Problem solved."

Sam went through the pockets of the dead man. He grabbed the rifle, and went back to the first man he killed. He pulled out all of the dead man's pocket litter, and slung that rifle as well. He turned and walked down the hill.

When he got to the truck, he piled the two rifles on top of the bed cover. He took the magazine out of the MP5, and made the weapon safe. He did the same thing for both of the Weatherby .308s.

Lazarus looked at the rifles, "Weatherbys. Let me guess, the snipers are British. SAS?"

Sam shook his head, "No way. These guys were way too easy to kill. They weren't military trained snipers. They didn't have spotters or any kind of security. They didn't have anybody watching their six o'clock approach. No way they're SAS. I don't even think they were Brits. Hell, I don't even think they were military. As civilians go, they were good. But it was like they learned it out of a book, all theory, no real practice. I don't think they were fully briefed on who they were going up against. So, maybe they were some kind of mechanic, but not military, possibly some kind of organized crime. Lookin' at their pocket litter, their IDs are good, but not the best. So, whoever they are, probably not a government organization backing them."

Lazarus tucked that bit of information away, “So, now, where’s the cache with our weapons in it?”

Sam pointed at the lights on the pickup truck, “Maybe we can do this without telling everybody where we are.”

Lazarus walked back and turned the lights off, “Anything else you need?”

Sam nodded, “As a matter of fact, there’s a shovel in the bed of the truck. Can you get it out so that we can dig up the cache?”

Lazarus looked down at the pants and shoes he was wearing. He wasn’t exactly dressed for digging in the mud. Sam watched Lazarus’ silent appraisal, “Don’t worry, I’ll do the digging. This time.”

Lazarus took the two rifles and the submachine gun and put them on the back seat. He opened up the camper, rummaged around and pulled out the shovel. Sam took a flashlight and GPS out of the truck. He turned on the GPS, let it warm up, and put in the geo coordinates. He walked forward with the GPS, and turned the flashlight on. Lazarus followed him with the shovel. Sam came to a stop. He traded the GPS and flashlight for the shovel. Lazarus held the flashlight so that Sam could see what he was doing.

Sam started digging. He jammed the shovel into the dirt. Two shovels of turned dirt, and the shovel struck something. It wasn’t buried very deep. His smile beamed in the light of the flashlight, “I guess they didn’t want to work too hard. For once, I’m glad somebody decided to be lazy.”

Sam cleared the dirt off of the pelican cases. Lazarus walked back to the truck, and drove it over. Sam pulled the boxes from the ground, and handed them to Lazarus. Lazarus walked them to the back of the truck. He opened up each case, and inventoried the contents.

“Was it everything you wanted?” Sam asked.

Lazarus nodded, “yeah, looking pretty good. We have the long guns and the pistols. And, they threw in a lot of extra ammunition as well.”

Sam was happy, “See, I told you my contacts were good. Now that you’re satisfied, we can wire the money for the next geo coordinates.”

Lazarus was satisfied with the arraignment. It was working well so far, despite the interlopers.

“Hey, Sam, you might want to tell your supplier about our welcoming committee.”

“Huh, why?”

“Think about it. If these guys knew we were coming to the cache, somebody had to tell them.”

Sam nodded, “Yeah, I see. There has to be someone on the inside feeding them information. And, if the snitch is feeding them information about us, they may be feeding information about my suppliers. I don’t think they’re going to be too happy to find out they have a snitch in their operation.

Lazarus agreed, “I can well imagine they wouldn’t.”

Chapter 6

Father, Bless this Van.

Lazarus thought about the last geo cache that they had picked up. The more he thought about it, the less he liked the situation. The problem that he contemplated was the truck they were in. It was large, which in itself, wasn't a bad thing. It had plenty of room for weapons and munitions. Plus, it had a big back seat, which would give Lilith a place to sit.

The problem with the pickup truck was that it belonged to Sam. Anybody that knew Sam, knew about the pickup truck. If anyone wanted to jam them up, all they needed to know was that Lazarus and Sam would be carrying illegal weapons and munitions, and the make, model, and license plate number of the truck they were carrying them in. Next thing you know, there's a fatal shoot out on the side of the road, and R.I.P. for Sam and Lazarus.

Lazarus brought this up with Sam. Sam didn't look too happy about giving up his comfortable Dodge Ram with the bucket seats and the satellite radio. It took a while, but Lazarus finally brought him over to the idea of ditching the truck for the rest of the trip.

"So, where are we going to get a replacement," Sam asked.

Lazarus replied, "No problem. I have a guy in Indianapolis that can help. His last name is Moretti, and he has some ties with organized crime. He can point us in the right direction."

They made good time driving to Indianapolis. They got there and stayed at a Hyatt for the night. The next morning, they got up to head over to Lazarus' contact. Lazarus gave Sam the address, and Sam plugged it into his mapping program. Thirty minutes later, they pulled onto Union Street, up to a Catholic church.

Sam pulled up in the street next to the church, "Really, a Catholic church? Who do you work for again? Are you trying to put me on a direct path to hell?"

Lazarus laughed, "Don't worry. I'm not working for the infernal powers. Father Moretti has family on both sides of the aisle. He can give me a name, and send me someplace to get a vehicle we can use."

They walked inside, kneeled, and made the sign of the cross. They walked back to Father Moretti's office. They stepped inside the office, and an older lady working outside of Father Moretti's office smiled as they entered, "Can I help you?" The plate on her desk said, 'Mrs. Donbar.'

Lazarus nodded at her. "Yeah, I need to talk to Father Moretti. I have a favor to ask of him."

She looked confused, "Do you have an appointment?"

Lazarus shook his head, "No, my friend and I were driving through, and I wanted to stop by and say hello."

Mrs. Donbar's confused look changed to one of concern, "I'm sorry, he's a busy man. Usually, we need you to make an appointment."

Lazarus smiled. He thought this might end up being a long conversation. Not because Mrs. Donbar was trying to be difficult. Lazarus got the feeling from the conversation that Mrs. Donbar wasn't quick on the uptake. He decided to try a

tactic that had worked out well for him in the past. He decided to be extremely pleasant to her.

“No ma’am. I’m sorry. Let me explain. I’m an old friend of Father Moretti. My name is Eli Bethany.”

He smiled at her, she smiled back. He walked over to her and put his hand forward to shake hers. As she reached out, he took her hand, then turned it and kissed the back. She blushed. After he kissed the back of her hand, he put his left hand over the top of hers, in effect, sealing the kiss between her hand and his, creating an intimate moment between them. He looked into her eyes.

“If you could, I think Father Moretti will be happy to see me. Could you please tell him that Eli Bethany is here?”

She blushed, and stood up. She was definitely not used to getting this much attention from a man. Her husband probably hadn’t created that feeling of intimacy in quite a long time. She walked over to Father Moretti’s office, and opened the door. She stepped inside and announced them. She said something else that Lazarus couldn’t quite hear.

“Ah, Eli! How are you Eli?”

The voice boomed out of the office. Mrs. Donbar walked out, a gleam in her eye as she looked at Lazarus, “Father Moretti will be happy to see you, Mr. Bethany.”

Eli bowed slightly, “Please, call me Eli. All my friends call me Eli.”

Mrs. Donbar looked very pleased as she sat back down. She would be thinking about that kiss on her hand for quite some time. Sam watched the entire situation with amusement. As they walked into the priest’s office, he leaned over and told Lazarus, “You’re going to have to teach me that move sometime.”

Lazarus’ face was the picture of innocence, “What move’s that?”

Sam snorted. They entered the priest’s office. As they walked in, Father Moretti stood up with his arms spread wide. Moretti walked around his desk and gave Lazarus a hug. Moretti let go of Lazarus, looked at Sam and held out his hand, “Hello, how are you? My name’s Father Moretti.”

Sam held out his hand and shook the priest’s hand. Moretti wasn’t a small man. He had the look of a wrestler. The years had added pounds since he had been on the mat, though. Still, that hand shake indicated that Father Moretti had sand. Sam wouldn’t be surprised if Father Moretti worked in the trades when he was younger, maybe as a bricklayer.

Lazarus motioned towards Sam, “Father Moretti, this is my friend, Sam Diabo. Sam, this is Father Michael Moretti.”

Moretti beamed at Sam. “Well, you’re traveling in good company here, Sam.”

Sam smiled back at the Father, “Well, I don’t know if he’s good company, but he accomplishes good things.”

Moretti laughed, “Ah well, I haven’t traveled with him. I’ll have to rely on your word about that. I just know he does good deeds.”

Sam nodded, “Yes he does.”

Lazarus waved it off, “Stop it, I’m gonna blush if you two keep it up.”

Father Moretti smiled as he walked back to his chair. He motioned to the two chairs in front of the desk. Lazarus and Sam each took a seat.

“So, what can I help you with Eli? Knowing you, I don’t think you came here just to say hello and chew the fat with me. What ‘cha got going these days?”

“Well, Father, I was wondering if you could do me a favor. You remember Joe Rignel?”

The smile on Moretti’s face disappeared, and he became very serious. He motioned towards the door and mimicked closing it. Sam stood up, crossed the office to close it, and sat back down.

Father Moretti leaned in and spoke, “You realize that I don’t really run in those circles anymore, right? I’m not sure it would be a good thing for me to send you to some of my old contacts. A lot of those boys are retired, or have been *retired* since I ran with them, if you get my meaning.”

Lazarus nodded, “Okay, I get that. Maybe I can tell you what I need, and you can give me an indication of what I need to do.”

Father Moretti nodded, and sat back, waiting to hear what Lazarus was going to tell him.

Lazarus continued, “I have a situation. We have a pickup truck, that is, unfortunately, way too noticeable. We have to, ah, transport some things to the western part of the country. Some of these things might be a problem if, say, the police or feds decided to pull us over.”

Father Moretti held up his hands, “I don’t think I need to know what you’re traveling with or where you’re traveling to.”

Lazarus nodded, “I agree, better you don’t know.”

Father Moretti looked at Lazarus, “You still sleeping with the angels there, Eli?”

Lazarus spread his hands wide, “What do you think, Michael?”

Father Moretti stared intently at Lazarus, then nodded. He turned to Sam, “This guy helped my sister out when she had some pretty bad problems. Not only did he save her life, but he also convinced me that there was a better way for me to spend mine. I didn’t run with a good crowd back in the day. Some of them were mobbed up. So now, not only do I have my family, but I get to help people every day.”

He turned back to Lazarus, “I have a better proposition for you. I still have a few cousins that may be able to help you out if you want to go that route. But, I think I have a better solution for your problem.”

Sam spoke up, “I’d appreciate it if I could come back and get my Dodge back after we’re finished.”

Father Moretti nodded, “yeah, I think I can help you out with that.”

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Sam wasn’t happy at all. Still, as a solution, it wasn’t bad. It was a white, Ford, Econoline van. It wasn’t a panel van, but one that was set up for fifteen passengers, with windows on the sides. The windows behind the driver and passenger seats were tinted very dark, which would help hide their cargo. They had to take out the back two seats to have room for everything, though. Still, it had the two seats up front, and a bench seat, with plenty of room for everything else in the back. It wouldn’t be as comfortable as Sam’s truck, but it wouldn’t be too bad.

Lazarus pointed at the radio, “Look, at least they have satellite radio.”

“You ain’t helping much, Eli,” Sam grouched.

They were at a garage for local Catholic charities. Vans for the Diocese operated out of the garage for the parishioners of the Catholic churches in Indianapolis.

Sam could park his truck inside the garage, which was a plus because it kept inquisitive minds out of their business, and gave Sam's truck some security as well. They took the seats out of the back, and transferred the pelican cases from the truck to the van. The rest of their luggage and equipment was quickly passed over as well.

Sam got into the van and fired up the engine. Lazarus hit the button on the wall and the metal door began rising. Sam pulled the van forward, and Lazarus shut the door behind it. He walked to a side door, opened it, and walked out to the waiting van. Lazarus hopped inside. Sam was playing with the satellite radio on the dash. He punched a few buttons, and music fired up, but Sam didn't look too pleased.

"What's wrong?" Lazarus asked.

Sam poked at buttons on the radio, "Well, you're right, it has satellite radio. Problem is, there isn't a subscription."

Lazarus looked at him, "Are you going to grumble about this all the way to Arizona?"

Sam had a frown on his face. Lazarus got the hint.

"Okay, what do I have to do to activate the subscription?"

Sam smiled. He rattled off a phone number, and the number on the radio. Lazarus called the number, and pulled out a credit card to charge the subscription.

"What do you mean, a whole year? I don't want it a whole year. I can't get a subscription for a month?"

Sam's smile grew bigger as Lazarus argued with the sales representative.

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The next stop was an old, run down gas station outside of Terre Haute, Indiana. It was daylight, the land was flat, and there wasn't any available cover for shooters. The only shot was from an overpass two miles away, which, while possible, was extremely doubtful. This made it unlikely shooters could try to reach out and touch them. Lazarus did a sweep for explosives, and didn't find anything. They looked inside and found two pelican cases. There were lots of ammo cans as well, with 7.62mm written on the side in yellow ink. There was a thousand rounds of ammunition for each of the weapons.

Sam opened up the pelican cases, and showed the contents to Lazarus, "So, what do you think?"

Lazarus whistled, "I haven't seen those for a while. I didn't know they still made them. Last time I used one was in Vietnam."

Sam smiled, "They still make them, but not as many since the Department of Defense went with the M249 and the M240B. But I figured, since we have big problems, we might want to use these."

They were looking at a model based off of the WWII German Maschinengewehr 42, and would later inspire the M249 5.56 Squad Automatic Weapon. It was a 7.62 M60E6, with bipod and vertical hand grip.

Lazarus nodded, "Big problem, big gun. I agree. I'm not sure if I'll be able to hold it while I shoot it, though."

Sam was very happy. He was like a kid in a candy store, “Yeah, and notice, this is the special operations configuration. They only made a few of these things before the DoD switched over to the SAW.”

Sam was happy, so Lazarus was happy. He hoped they wouldn’t need to use them, but you never knew.

Lazarus frowned, “I hope we don’t get caught with this in Illinois. We’ll never get out of prison.”

Sam nodded, “Well, you have to figure it this way. If they catch us with any of this, in any state, we’re going straight to federal court. States won’t be prosecuting until after the Feds are through with us. You’re gonna see the FBI, the Marshalls, and the ATF.”

Lazarus took a deep breath, “On through Illinois.”

They put the cases in the back of the Econoline, and covered them with tarps and blankets. Sam drove down the secondary road to the main Highway, “So, where we goin’ now?”

Lazarus pointed west, “Thataway.”

Chapter 7

Mr. Mephistopheles plays hide and go seek.

They began driving again, and quickly entered Illinois. A few hours later, they crossed the Mississippi River, and they were in Saint Louis. They stopped, and Lazarus sprung for rooms at the Ritz Carlton. The van would be parked in a parking garage with twenty four hour security. They made sure the tarps and blankets covered everything.

When Lazarus got to his room, he made a phone call. He talked for a few minutes, and got a telephone number. He called the number, got an address, and wrote it down. He hung up. He was hungry, and he decided to go down to the restaurant. He called Sam, but Sam had already ordered room service, and wanted to stay in to watch TV.

Lazarus made his way to the restaurant, and waited to be seated. He followed the hostess in, and did what he did everywhere. He evaluated the situation. Cautious men lived longer. He looked around the room as he walked. There were two of them, a couple. He recognized them as soon as he saw them. They were not hard to notice. To everybody else in the restaurant, they probably looked like they were on a date. He saw right through it though. They were on the job. He didn’t know who they were, or who they worked for, but they were too casual, trying too hard not to look at him.

He looked at the clothes. Comfortable shoes, relaxed dress, but not *too* relaxed. He could see the man’s sidearm, discreet, but noticeable if you knew what you were looking for. He assumed that the lady had her sidearm in her purse. They were police, but he didn’t think they were local. No, these were Feds. He just didn’t know what agency they were with.

They weren't DEA. DEA wouldn't be in a restaurant in the Ritz Carlton. Too upscale for most of the people they dealt with. Not FBI, no master's degrees or accountants here, they looked like regular people. They might be US Marshal Service, but he wasn't an escaped felon, and had no priors. He was thinking they might be ATF, or, more properly BATFE. His mind flashed back to what Sam had said about the machineguns.

He walked to his table, and took a seat, once again sitting to face the room. This had the added benefit of facing their table. He sat there, looked at the menu, and told the young, pretty waitress that he wanted the turkey club, sweet tea, and white chocolate cheese cake for dessert. He looked around the room. He didn't see any others, so he pointedly looked at them and smiled at the agents, letting them know that he had made them. This immediately pissed them off. Still, they either had him, or they didn't. He thought not. If they knew what he had in the van, he'd already be in handcuffs. So, they were back up.

Who for? he wondered.

He shrugged it off. He just hoped nothing happened until after he was finished eating. He didn't like the idea of spending the night in jail without eating first. He knew that at this time of evening, he had already missed any meals that would be served in lockup. The agents didn't do anything, so he sipped the sweet tea. A few minutes passed, and still nothing happened. His turkey club arrived, and he began eating.

The turkey club was good, though the bread was toasted a bit much for his taste. He soaked the French fries in ketchup, and took his sweet time eating them. He knew something was coming, but he waited for them to make the first move. The agents didn't move, however, apparently satisfied to watch him. He finished, and the waitress took the plate away, promising to bring his dessert over right away.

The cheesecake arrived, and the waitress asked him if he wanted anything else. He asked for a cup of coffee to go with the cheesecake. She hurried away to get it for him. He waited for her to bring the coffee back before he started eating his dessert. Still, the two federal agents sat, doing nothing, keeping an eye on him. The waitress came back with the coffee, and he motioned for her to come close. She leaned in, and he whispered in her ear. She walked back to the kitchen. She walked out with two more pieces of cheesecake and sat them in front of the agents, then pointed over at Lazarus. They glowered in his direction, all pretenses gone. He smiled and motioned for them to eat up. They didn't look happy.

Well, there is just no pleasing some people, he thought.

Slowly, he made his way through the cheesecake, taking dainty bites and sipping small sips of coffee. He knew that if he got up to leave, one of the agents would attempt to stop him, and then it might truly get ugly in the restaurant. He didn't want that, not with all of these people around. Plus, hurting federal agents really had no upside. He waited. He didn't have to wait much longer.

Mephistopheles came strolling into the restaurant as if he owned the place. He was quite dapper, black suit, black shirt, blood red tie. He waved at a few people, chatted with a couple, and leaned over and said something in an attractive blonde's ear that made her blush. Mephistopheles, like most demons, attracted attention wherever he went, from men and women. He had that modern, metro-

sexual look to him. His hair was perfectly groomed, mustache and goatee trimmed to exacting standards, his nails meticulously cut and polished.

He waved at, and started towards Lazarus. He ignored the agents as he passed, but Lazarus knew who they were working for. A minute after he walked into the restaurant, two more agents, both men, walked in and sat closer to the door. Lazarus looked, and he was able to identify one of them. Special Agent Jerry Johnston was definitely on Lazarus' to do list. He hoped he would be able to check that one off sometime soon.

Too bad, Jerry, you missed the cheesecake, you should have been here sooner, he thought.

Mephistopheles walked over, and held out a delicate, effeminate hand to shake, "Hi, how are you, Eli? Long time no see. Mind if I join you?"

Lazarus lightly held the hand, shook it, and motioned towards the chair on the other side of the table, "I was wondering when you'd show up." He motioned towards the agents, "I didn't know who they were working for, but I assumed I would find out eventually."

Mephistopheles sat down and casually motioned towards them, "yes, I know, they're good muscle, and the threat of the federal government behind them is often as good an incentive as the threat of violence."

Lazarus looked around at the agents, "Still, your lap dogs should probably learn a little bit about the word 'clandestine' or 'covert.'"

Mephistopheles shrugged off the criticism, "No, I think they're quite good at what they do. For instance, they made sure that you stayed in place until I arrived. Now we can have a little chat."

Lazarus nodded, "As for minding, well, yes I do. I mean, come on Mephis... Mephista..."

Lazarus stopped as if he was having trouble pronouncing Mephistopheles name, "Damn, have you ever considered something a little shorter than five syllables?"

Mephistopheles face darkened and he frowned as Lazarus went on his tangent.

Lazarus continued, "Let's see, Meph, no sounds like Meth. How about phis? No, sounds like a venereal disease. Staphal? No that just sounds like a weirder venereal disease. Oh, wait, I've got it. Les, I'll call you Les? How's that? Better than having to stumble over all five syllables."

Mephistopheles was not amused, "If you're finished with your attempt at humor, can we start talking about why I'm here?"

"Sure Les, but first, let me say, I do mind that you join me. Not that I am going to do anything about it, because, let's face it, too many innocents here."

Mephistopheles nodded, pleased with himself. He was fussy with his outfit. He pulled at the cuffs of his sleeves as he listened to Lazarus, brushing the lint off of his jacket, "Still, I know you won't be disappointed with our chat."

Lazarus spread his hands, "Depends, I guess, on what you want to chat about, Les."

Mephistopheles exhaled dramatically at the nickname, "Yes, I guess it would depend on that. But, I think that you'll be satisfied with the proposition that I have for you."

Lazarus didn't have a clue what Mephistopheles was talking about. He assumed it had something to do with his current mission. Things were getting crowded. It's

not every day that Lazarus had direct contact with demons and angels. He didn't know what the angles were, but he knew that the demonic crowd wasn't above trying to sabotage each other, or him. As for Mephistopheles trying to help him out, he knew that anything that the demon suggested would be self-serving.

"And what would that be, Les?"

Lazarus watched Mephistopheles flinch every time he said the name Les. Mephistopheles was an ego guy. Mephistopheles knew that Lazarus was trying to prod him, provoke him. Lazarus was enjoying his consternation. Sometimes, useful things fall out when you shake the tree. He watched Mephistopheles closely, trying to glean clues as the demon dealt with the disrespect.

Mephistopheles was struggling to contain his anger. The eyes gave it away. Lazarus could see the hellfire grow behind the surface as he prodded. The anger was causing Mephistopheles to lose his control. Mephistopheles seemed to grow, to encompass more area, more energy, though he didn't change physically. This was dicey for Lazarus. If he tipped Mephistopheles too far over the edge, a lot of people might get hurt. He knew he could only push him so far.

An enraged demon would cause a lot of damage. Unfortunately, Lazarus only had his Springfield XD with him. Dealing damage to Mephistopheles would be very hard. Demons, unlike the possessed, were much harder to kill. Lazarus had fifteen bullets in his pistol with three magazines in reserve, giving him sixty rounds of his special, frangible .45 caliber bullets. They would do a lot of damage to Mephistopheles, but they wouldn't kill him. Lazarus would need his dual swords if he wanted to destroy the demon's corporeal form. Unfortunately, the swords were in his room.

"So, are you going to tell me?" Lazarus asked.

With a shudder, Mephistopheles brought himself back under control. The eyes changed, and he was a good imitation of a human again. Even the smile came back, "Well, if you want to know, I came here to give you a warning."

Lazarus feigned shock, "Wow, you came here to give me a warning? I'm touched that you have such an interest in my wellbeing."

Mephistopheles' face clouded again, "Please, your childish sarcasm isn't helping this situation. I don't want to be here, any more than you want me here. I have other things I could be doing right now, but circumstances dictate that I come to you about this."

Lazarus nodded, "Okay, truce. What do you want to talk to me about?"

"I understand that you've been directed to work with a certain, ah, associate of mine."

Lazarus thought about it carefully, then answered, "You understand, I can't really go into any details with you about any of this. Anything that I'm doing right now was sanctioned by your boss, and my boss. You know this, right?"

Mephistopheles nodded, "Yes, I understand that completely. I know that she's been directed to work with you. But, there are some," he paused, "well, worries about her."

Lazarus sat motionless, "Worries from your boss, or worries from you?"

Mephistopheles licked his lips, "Well, they don't come from the boss, but I have some concerns."

Lazarus looked at him, "So, what you're telling me, is that you're worried about her being on this mission? Why?"

Mephistopheles thought for a moment, "Something isn't right. Not about anything, not about any of this."

Lazarus nodded, "Yes, I agree. Nothing is right about any of this. Angels and demons are two worlds apart, and should never work with each other. I agree with you completely."

Mephistopheles started to say something. Lazarus forestalled him with an upraised hand, "But, my bosses have talked to me directly about this, and there's no mistake. This is what they want. They want Lilith and me to work together to fix this problem."

Mephistopheles glanced away, bit his lip, and then looked back, "I think it's a mistake. I don't know what's going on, but I know something isn't right. I don't think she's working for anybody but herself."

Lazarus studied him, "Yeah, what else is new? She always puts number one in the forefront. But, let me ask you this. If not us, then who will take care of the problem." Lazarus took a drink of coffee, "I know that your boss and my boss seemed to have decided that this is the course of action to take. Corporate," he pointed up, "well, they don't particularly care what we want, as long as we do what they ask of us."

Lazarus leaned forward, "I think that the consequences for any of us, to go against our bosses' wishes, would be catastrophic."

Mephistopheles nodded slowly, "I understand this, but I think there's something else at play here, and I don't know what it is."

They both sat quietly for a moment, reflecting on the situation. Lazarus didn't really know what the hell was going on. There was no real information being given to him. Mephistopheles wasn't forthcoming. Mephistopheles' unease and being uncomfortable with the situation wasn't much to go on. That wasn't enough for him to change his mind about the assignment. He thought about the other, possible party or parties, but he wasn't going to give that information away to Mephistopheles.

"Mephistopheles, do you have anything you can tell me besides the fact that you have an uneasy feeling about this mission? That's a little vague. I don't think I can take that back to the Angels, and get them to change their minds."

Mephistopheles traced a design on the table top with his finger, "You have to understand. I'm the guide. I'm the one who knows how things work. I understand the power, how it works, who it shifts to, and who's who in the pecking order of Hell. I know who's in favor, and who isn't."

Lazarus was getting tired of the conversation, "And? What does that have to do with this?"

"This thing with Lilith, it shouldn't be."

Lazarus asked again, "Please, come to the point. What shouldn't be?"

"Lilith used to be his favorite, many, many years ago, before you were resurrected. Then 'BOOM!' You were snatched back, away from his ministrations. He was so pissed. In his own house as well. Plus, you started working against us. The boss didn't like that, at all. Many of us took the hits, but Lilith was hit the most. You could feel her desperation. She wasn't making her goals. The boss took

an interest in her, and not in a good way. He blamed her for you. That failure, your loss from Hell, and the subsequent operations that you did against us, that became her failure.”

Lazarus started to get interested in the conversation again. Insight into the inner workings of the evil one’s minions could be useful in the future, “Continue.”

“Somehow, something changed. Dynamics changed, and they shouldn’t have. She’s in favor again, and I don’t know why. I want to know the answer.”

Lazarus thought about it, then he hit on one thing, “If she’s no longer the favorite, who took her spot? Who was the favorite after she began to slip?”

Mephistopheles didn’t say a word. An innocuous smile graced his lips. He looked up at Lazarus. Lazarus understood, “Ah, you were the favorite when I began tearing up her operation.”

Lazarus made a logical leap, “The tips, the leads I’ve been getting. You’re the one who’s been giving them to me. You’re the reason that I’ve been so effective against her operations.”

Lazarus watched Mephistopheles for confirmation. The fact that he wasn’t saying anything, staring at his manicure with that innocent smile on his lips, was a screaming declaration.

Mephistopheles smiled, “It doesn’t bother you to know that you’ve been used as my cat’s paw, my instrument to attack Lilith?”

Lazarus shook his head, “No, not really. One dead demon’s as good as another in my book. If I can use you to capitalize on killing her possessed, that’s good for me. Besides, once I tell her what’s been happening, she’ll probably start feeding me information about your operations. All of that’s good for me. Hopefully, you’ll all start feeding me information about each other’s operations. Hell, a few more demons will probably be more than willing to give me information about you once they know you’ve been feeding me information about Hell’s operations.”

Mephistopheles eyes narrowed at this prospect, “That’s a possibility. They’ll probably applaud my efforts more than criticize them, however.”

Lazarus agreed, “It’s true, your team plays by a completely different set of rules than mine does. And you’re correct. They’ll probably admire your tactics, and your successes. But then they’ll start to wonder, ‘has he put the knife in my back, yet?’ And they’re going to start looking around. Anything that might be construed as an attack on them, no matter how insignificant, will get them thinking about how to get back at you. So, all things considered, I think this might be a win-win for me.”

Having made his point, he waited for Mephistopheles to put up a counter argument. Mephistopheles sat motionless, saying nothing. Lazarus could tell that he was considering the angles, “So, what were you going to tell me about Lilith? You’re telling me that she’s back in her boss’ good graces? How? If she’s not corrupting human souls the way the boss wants it, then how is she back in his good graces?”

Mephistopheles nodded, “Yes, that’s the question isn’t it? How is it that she’s back in his good graces?”

Lazarus leaned forward, and pointed at Mephistopheles, “So I guess this means that you aren’t exactly the top guy anymore? I guess your power base is eroding, and you’re probably pissed about that fact? Am I close to the truth here?”

Mephistopheles hesitantly confirmed this, "Too close to the truth, if you should know." He paused, running his hand over the tablecloth, then continued, "So, what you should be asking yourself, is: what has she promised to deliver to the boss to get back into his good graces?"

Lazarus thought about this. He knew that Lilith wasn't going to play by the rules. The fact that she might have done something or promised something to please her boss didn't surprise him. Lazarus knew it might have something to do with him. Her boss was still pissed that Lazarus had been plucked from his ministrations just when things were getting started. Satan probably had special joys planned for him, a damned soul sprung from hell. So, no new information there.

Lazarus still wondered about the third party interests, though, that was working around this situation. He wondered if it was Mephistopheles. If Les wanted to put the kibosh on the mission, that might explain a few things. Still, there was the fact that Lilith had gotten a leg up, more power, more face time with her boss. Lazarus just didn't know. He would have to let it play out and see what happened.

"So, Les, what you're telling me right now, is that you're pissed that daddy isn't paying as much attention to you as he is to Lilith. I suppose that could be a problem from your perspective, but you have to look at mine. I have clear marching orders from my boss. He's pretty persuasive. He wants me to go ahead and work with Lilith. So, I don't think that I'm going to be able to help you with this problem of yours."

A frown crossed Mephistopheles' face. Lazarus could see the hellfire dancing in the eyes. Mephistopheles was definitely not happy now, "That, is very," he paused, "unfortunate." He continued, "You need to understand, Lazarus. This may not just be my problem. YOU need to stop this. There's something else going on here."

Lazarus nodded, "Yes, there usually is. But until I figure out what it is, the mission continues as planned."

"You're making a mistake, a big mistake."

"Could be Les. But I've made mistakes before. I just have to see how this all plays out."

Mephistopheles studied Lazarus' face. He stood up, and pushed the chair in. He adjusted his jacket, and brushed the sleeves for nonexistent dirt. Lazarus could bet that he was probably picked on when he was a little demon, by all the big bully demons in the school yard.

"You're going to regret that decision, Lazarus."

Lazarus nodded, "Could be. I guess we'll see soon enough, won't we."

Mephistopheles smile was cold when he replied, "Yes, I guess we will."

He started to turn away, but Lazarus wasn't finished with him yet, "Mephistopheles."

Mephistopheles turned back to him, "What?"

"Do you know anything about shooters at the Poconos?"

Mephistopheles considered the question, "No, why? What's in the Poconos?"

Lazarus smiled, "Just curious."

Mephistopheles watched him for a sign that Lazarus was going to say something else. When nothing else was forthcoming, he turned and walked away. As he

passed the four agents, they stood up, dropped money on the tables for their bills, and followed him out the door.

Lazarus called the waitress over and asked her for the check. She gave him a lovely smile, and because of that, he left her a twenty five percent tip on the credit card receipt. Since everybody evidently knew where he was, he didn't feel the need to use cash. He stood up, and decided to go to the bar. It was one of those nights. He walked in, found a good location where he could look around and see if anybody had bad intentions, and sat down. He ordered a Glenfiddich, neat, and sat back to drink the single malt.

He turned the new information around in his head. There was a stalking horse out there, just outside of his vision. He didn't know who it was, or what it meant. He just knew it was probably bad news, since it meant collusion with the outside forces that were hell bent on destroying his world. He was worried. Not for himself, but for Sam. Sam was like a son to him.

Sam was the most capable human being he had ever met. His combat skill was like nothing Lazarus had ever seen in a mortal human before. Sam was intuitive, competent, and skilled. He was tactically and strategically proficient. Hell, Sam should be a general in the military. He had that kind of grasp on the use of violence. Sam had one problem, though. He didn't suffer fools, which meant that he would never rise to a high level in that type of political environment. Sam was not, and never would be, a political animal. He was a rarity, an honest man.

Lazarus was also worried that even he, with two thousand years of experience, wasn't up to this task. He had dealt death to thousands of possessed over the years. He knew violence. He was willing to deal with the filth of the world. He knew the depravity of human beings, and what they were willing to do to grasp at power.

This was different though. This was dealing directly with demons. This was dealing with interdimensional horrors. This was completely outside of his comfort zone. He just hoped that two thousand years of combat had prepared him for what was going to happen next. He hoped that he would be able to keep Sam out of harm's way. He didn't know if he would be able to do that, though, not with this problem set. Still, they had weapons, munitions. Those items should help mitigate the problem. At least, he hoped it would.

He ordered another Glenfiddich. Now he turned the problem of Mephistopheles around in his head. Even if Mephistopheles wasn't the stalking horse, he was still intent on stopping the mission. The BATFE agents gave Lazarus a good idea about how that was going to happen. He just didn't know which stop they would try to intervene at. While they knew where he was, there was a good chance they didn't know what Lazarus and Sam were driving. Lazarus was glad that they had switched from the truck to the van. Lazarus would have to take countermeasures to ensure that they didn't find out.

Two was his limit. He paid his bill and decided to go to Sam's room, to give him the bad news. He took the elevator, and got off on Sam's floor. He walked to the room and knocked. He saw the light in the peephole dim. Sam opened the door. He was standing there in a pair of shorts. Two women walked by and openly stared at Sam's cut physique.

"Don't you know you can catch cold dressed like that?"

"Not in my hotel room I can't."

Lazarus could feel the heat coming from the room. The temperature was turned up until it was almost uncomfortable. Lazarus conceded the point, "True, but you might give a few women a heart attack if you stand around in the hallway dressed like that."

Sam shrugged, "So I won't stand around in the hallway. That should take care of the situation."

Lazarus smiled at the simple solution.

"What you doing here so late? I thought you were going to get something to eat?" Sam motioned for him to come in, out of the hallway.

"Yeah, I got something to eat, and I had a visitor while I did so, kind of unannounced."

Sam motioned towards the chair in the room, "So, come on. Give it up. Who was it?"

Lazarus walked over and sat down. Sam had an unopened bottle of coke and offered it to Lazarus. Lazarus declined, "Mephistopheles decided to sit down with me."

Sam went still. Lazarus could tell he was thinking about the implications. Sam spoke, "So, in the last five days, you've met with two demons and one angel. Somehow, I think things are beginning to get complicated."

Lazarus nodded, "Yeah, I agree. The worst part was, he was there with ATF agents."

Sam's eyes grew big, "Whoa, yeah, that could be very bad for us, especially if they interfere with us when we grab the explosives or AT-4s."

Lazarus continued, "There's some kind of power thing going on between Mephistopheles and Lilith, and unfortunately, we've landed right smack in the middle of it."

"How's that going to affect what we're doing?"

Lazarus shrugged, "Don't know. I think we have to keep moving forward until the other shoe drops. Then we find out."

Sam shook his head, "I don't think I like that idea. Too many bad things could happen."

"Yeah, I know. But we have to play the hand that's dealt us, and that means dealing with Mephistopheles and the ATF. We have no choice. We have to do a little counter-surveillance and see if they're trailing us."

"If they are, what's our next move?"

Lazarus thought about it, "I don't think they know about the van, otherwise, we'd already be in jail. We need to make sure they don't find out. You and I are too noticeable, so we need to get somebody else to move it for us."

Sam popped the top on his coke, "You have someone in mind?"

Lazarus nodded, "I think so. Only way to do it is with a cut out. I have a friend that's good at that kind of thing. She has an interesting background. I have a burn phone. I'll contact her, and we'll set up the dead drop for the keys and the location for the meet."

"What do you want me to do?"

Lazarus continued, "Well, she'll be doing the heavy lifting. When she does the pick, and moves the van, all we have to do is lose the agents, go to the new location, and get the van."

Sam nodded, "Sure, just tell me what you need."

Lazarus smiled, "Well, it would probably be a good thing to split them up. That way, I have a better chance to pass the information with less company."

"How do you want to do it? You want me to try and draw them all off of you? Meet you at the pickup site?"

Lazarus thought for a moment, and shook his head. He stood up, found the hotel pen and paper and began writing, "No, just go out to this mall for a while, and wander around, maybe watch a movie or two. That will give me time do what I need to do. Then go into a counter-surveillance routine and act like you're trying to make and shake them. Do all the tradecraft, make them think you're serious about it. After all of that, about 6pm, you just need to go to this address, and pick up two pastrami sandwiches. Get the sandwiches, come back here, and you and I will eat two of the best pastrami sandwiches you've ever had." Lazarus wrote down all the directions for Sam.

Sam frowned, "Pastrami, in St. Louis? Come on, I can take you to two dozen deli's in Brooklyn that make fantastic pastrami sandwiches."

Lazarus looked at him and smiled, "Sam, you've got to have faith in me. Trust me, you'll love the pastrami at this shop. When you get there, ask for Angelo, tell him it's for me."

Sam wasn't too sure. He still had that suspicious look on his face, "Okay, I'll do what you say. I'll make sure the ATF guys think I'm going to a meet or something. No way the sandwiches are as good as the ones in Brooklyn, though."

Lazarus stood up, "Good. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised about the sandwiches, though. Okay, I'm out of here. Have a good night's sleep."

Lazarus walked over to the door. He opened it and stepped out into the hallway. The next part of all of this was going to be tricky. He'd have to do a hand off. It would have to be a live handoff since he didn't have any dead drops set up in St. Louis. He needed someone with skills.

He only knew of one person in the area that was capable of pulling it off. Pastor Jean Lemarcke, of the United Methodist Church in St. Louis. She was a skilled pickpocket, something she picked up before she joined the church, got her degree in theology and became a Pastor. Lazarus thought about it. He had strange acquaintances, but then he lived a strange life. When he got back to his room, he pulled out a burner phone, and made the phone call to set up the hand off.

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The next day was a beautiful day, crisp and sunny. It was Friday, so there were going to be crowds in the areas that he and Sam were using. Sam was already off to the mall. He said something about catching up on the new superhero movies that were out. Lazarus hoped Sam could pull a few agents off so that he could get something done today. It wasn't going to be too hard. All he had to do was walk around like an easy mark and let Jean do all the work. He had an envelope with directions and the keys to the van in his right coat pocket. It was up to Jean to scope the situation and pull off the pick without letting the agents around him know that a hand off was occurring.

The area was fantastic for this kind of operation. The Ritz-Carlton was located in Clayton, an area lined with art galleries, restaurants, and boutiques. The St.

Louis Galleria, with 165 stores, was within walking distance. If that didn't do it, he could hop the train at the Forsyth Boulevard Station and take them on a tour of St. Louis.

He began with a brunch at a small cafe just off the street to start his counter surveillance. Lazarus ate his baguette, drank his coffee, and read the newspaper. The table he sat at was far enough back into the café that he couldn't be seen from any convenient spots on the street. They had to stand directly across the street and look into the café, which he'd spot, or send someone into the café to check on him. They ended up sending someone in. It took a half hour, then the first agent came in to make sure that Lazarus hadn't snuck out through the back.

Surveillance is always a tricky proposition. You couldn't just have one person follow the target. The best way to do it was to have several individuals tracking. That way, fresh faces could move in and out of the target's immediate area. This made it much harder for the target to spot his tails. If this was a sanctioned surveillance, there would have been as many as seven or eight tails.

This guy was a little too obvious though. He didn't seem to have much experience in surveillance. That was good for Lazarus. It meant that they probably weren't using a trained surveillance team. So, this was probably not a sanctioned operation. That meant that they would have fewer options to interdict. It also meant that the ATF agents would be covering their tracks to make sure their bosses didn't find out what was going on.

The agent was tense, and tried to be too casual. Lazarus knew he was making an effort not to be noticed. It was very hard for any person to hide their intentions around Lazarus. The body language screamed at him. This was one of the reasons that he was good at what he did, and one of the reasons that he was still around.

He finished with his breakfast and newspaper. Now it was time to break out some serious counter-surveillance, and find out how good they were. He threw the detritus of his breakfast away, but kept the newspaper. While he was sitting, he folded the sections up so that they were easily separated. The portions of the newspaper would be used as a distraction. He stood and began walking.

He chose an alley at random and turned into it. He looked around, and placed one of the folded paper sectionals behind a dumpster. He walked back and crossed the street. He used the surfaces of the windows to watch the alley as he walked away. He slowed the tempo of his walk and was able to see a different agent go into the alley. Now he knew two of them.

He did quick stops and double backs as he walked from store to store. He used the angles and surfaces of the windows on the street. It took a while, but he finally spotted the third agent. They were doing the switch and follow, with one agent in range to watch him, then a switch and another agent was close enough to watch him. He had to give them credit, they were not bad. They weren't great though. Not like the Bulgarians during the height of the cold war.

Now that he knew their pattern, he just had to fill in the blanks. He used it to find the missing agent or agents. One agent kept him in view at all times. Since he knew three agents, he could time the pattern. When he couldn't see one of the three, he knew there had to be another agent. With this information, he just had to watch for the gap. The gap appeared, and he watched. He noticed another agent. He kept going for another hour, just to make sure that the timing was

correct and that he had spotted all of the surveillance team. He didn't see anybody else, so he was fairly confident that he had spotted all of them. None of the surveillance team here had been in the restaurant when he talked to Mephistopheles. That meant that Mephistopheles had a team of at least eight ATF agents.

He walked around some more. He placed the other newspaper sectionals so that they would have to expose themselves to investigate. Lazarus was having great fun with all of this. It had been a while since he had used this level of tradecraft, and he enjoyed blowing the dust off of his skills to see if he still had the capabilities. The last time he had used this level of tradecraft was before the Berlin Wall fell. He was a little worried though. He hadn't seen Jean at all.

He ducked into old record shop. The record store had aged gracefully. The store looked like it had been here forever. It expressed the history of the building without seeming old. It was aged, but not dilapidated or decrepit. This wasn't one of the glitzy, upscale stores of the area. Lazarus was amazed that it had escaped the fate of the buildings and stores around it. It was inviting and comfortable. It welcomed people in to enjoy the history of music and the ambiance of the building. It was filled with bins of old records, some with music that hadn't been heard in seventy years or more. It had 33s, 45s and 78 rpm records. Lazarus let the feeling of the place seep into him, and wandered around, flipping through old jazz records.

He faced the street. None of the agents came into the shop behind him. As he flipped through records, a woman walked into the shop. She was average height, about five foot four, dressed in a military style jacket, old torn blue jeans, and had blue hair. Lazarus kept the smile off of his face. There weren't too many customers in the record shop, and he didn't want to give away the game.

He pulled out two Miles Davis records and walked up to the counter, "Excuse me, do you take American Express?"

The man behind the counter shook his head. He was an older man, mid-forties, balding. The man looked like a living extension of the record store. He was wearing a gray sweater, brown corduroy pants, "I'm sorry, we only take MasterCard or Visa."

Lazarus shrugged, "Okay, I have a Visa I can use. Do you ship?"

The man nodded, "Yeah, of course we ship. Not many people buy records anymore, so we do a lot of business on the internet. We send records out across the States."

Lazarus continued to talk to the man, and he handed him the address that he wanted the records shipped to. As he did this, Jean stepped up and put an old Dizzy Gillespie record on the counter and paid for it. The man behind the counter put it into a bag for her and she walked away from the counter and out the door. Lazarus put his hands into several pockets, miming looking for his wallet. He put his hand into the pocket where the envelope had been stashed, and the envelope was gone. In its place was a piece of paper. He knew it was a note from Jean. He would wait until much later before he read it, not wanting to draw attention.

He paid for the two records and the shipping. It would arrive at Sam's house in New York in three days. He walked out of the record shop and into an art gallery. For the rest of the day, he spent his time looking at various art exhibitions. At the

end of the day, he stopped in a café and grabbed a latte to go. He walked down the street, and dropped the last paper onto a bench outside the hotel. Inside the newspaper was written a number. He didn't look back, just kept on walking.

He entered the Ritz Carlton, dodging the influx of new customers. He walked to the elevator, stepped inside and hit the number to his floor. As he walked to his room, he fished out the room key, and slipped it into the electronic lock. He walked in and dropped the empty latte cup into the garbage can. He walked into the bathroom and stood in front of the toilet. He pulled out the paper that Jean had put into his pocket. On it was written the number four, the same number he had written on the last section of paper. It had a location and time on it as well. He smiled. He crumpled the note and dropped it into the toilet. He flushed the toilet and watched the paper flow into the drain.

He walked back into the bedroom and called Sam's room. The phone rang and Sam picked it up, "Hello?"

"I've been looking forward to Angelo's pastrami sandwich all day," Lazarus said. "Come on down."

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"You weren't entirely straight with me," Sam accused Lazarus.

"What do you mean?" Lazarus asked.

The restaurant was bustling, with hotel guests and others from the surrounding area here for breakfast. Lazarus loved the coffee here. All in all, it was starting out to be a busy morning for the hotel.

"Angelo, you didn't tell me about Angelo."

"What about Angelo?"

"You didn't tell me that Angelo was from Jersey."

"And, your point being?"

"The pastrami was very good."

"I told you it would be. See, you should trust me when I tell you these things."

"Yeah, but you didn't say Angelo was from Jersey."

"Is there a point here, Sam?"

"Well, the reason that the pastrami is good, is because Angelo's from Jersey."

"That's not New York, though. You said the best pastrami sandwiches come from New York."

Sam nodded, "Yeah, I did, and I still believe they do. But then you have Jersey, and the Italians in Jersey make some pretty good food as well."

"So, what you're saying, in a very roundabout way, is that you really like Angelo's pastrami sandwiches."

Sam conceded, "Yeah, you could put it that way."

"Are you done with the Angelo thing?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

Lazarus looked at him, "You ready to go?"

"Yeah, I have everything packed, I just need to go back to the room to get it. Do you have a plan?" Sam asked.

Lazarus sat back, the plate in front of him wiped clean of anything that might have nutritional value on it. Still, he took the last piece of wheat toast and wiped the surface of the plate to make sure he got the last of it. He popped the piece of

toast into his mouth. Then he picked up the coffee cup and washed the toast down.

“Of course I do. I always have a plan.”

Sam looked around the restaurant. The ATF agents were sitting around them, and they weren't even trying to be stealthy. Sam was able to spot all eight of them. One of the agents seemed to take this as a challenge. He got up from the table and walked over to Lazarus and Sam. Lazarus looked up at the agent, and took another sip of coffee. He motioned to an empty chair at their table.

“Good morning, Agent Johnston. Care to have a seat?”

Agent Johnston was tall and lean, about six feet, and maybe one hundred and eighty pounds. He had reddish, blonde hair. He was wearing khakis, a button down blue shirt, and a nylon jacket. He sat down and began speaking, “You think you're smart?”

Lazarus pretended ignorance, “About what?”

Johnston leaned forward, “You think you can ditch us? You think you're going to be able to operate without us knowing about it?”

Lazarus continued drinking his coffee. It seemed like the best choice at the moment. Sam picked up his glass of milk and drank what was left.

Johnston spoke again, “I don't know what you were doing yesterday, but it didn't work.”

Lazarus wasn't about to let Johnston know that his operation yesterday, had in fact, been a success. If he did that, it would give the ATF agent an edge, give him information that he didn't currently have. So he led Johnston in a different direction.

“Not entirely true. I learned a few things yesterday.”

Johnston sat back against the chair, listening, hoping to glean information from what Lazarus was about to say.

“I learned who your team is, all eight of them. I also learned that your operation isn't sanctioned by your superiors. Otherwise, you would have had a lot more than four agents to throw at each of us. Therefore, you don't have all the resources that you would ordinarily have. So, I have to say, that my operation was fairly successful yesterday.”

Agent Johnston's eyes narrowed as Lazarus did his analysis. Johnston didn't say anything. Now he was playing Lazarus' game. They were both trying to elicit information, without giving any away. Lazarus calmly drank his coffee.

“Still, I want to give your guys kudos for their capabilities. They aren't half bad at surveillance. Not as good as, say, the Stasi secret police before the Berlin wall fell, but good enough for the people that they hunt in the USA. I doubt many of the people that your agents hunt have training in counter-surveillance. So, all in all, not a bad job.”

Johnston's face was stone. Lazarus just reminded Johnston that he was the superior adversary, with superior capabilities. Johnston was doing the calculus in his mind. He knew that Lazarus had something planned. He waited for more. Lazarus didn't say anything, just kept sipping his coffee. Sam finished his milk and sat the glass down. Johnston looked at him, and then looked back at Lazarus. He realized that no more information was forthcoming.

Agent Johnston stood up, "This isn't over." He turned from the table and walked away. Johnston made a circular motion with his finger pointed up at the ceiling, and the other agents stood up and followed him to the cash register to pay for their meals. The restaurant patrons were startled, and a few looked apprehensive as they watched the seven men and one woman stand in unison and walk out.

Sam and Lazarus watched them go. Sam spoke first, "I don't think that Agent Johnston is too happy with you right now."

Lazarus smiled, "I think you're wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't think Agent Johnston isn't too happy with *us*, right now."

Sam thought, and nodded, "Ah, right. Yeah, I think you're right."

They stood and walked over to pay for their meals. They walked through the lobby to the elevator. Agent Johnston and two agents were sitting there reading magazines. The agents watched them as they walked to the elevators. Lazarus knew that all of the exits were covered. They wouldn't be able to ditch the agents at the hotel. That would come later. It was a good thing that Lazarus had a plan.

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They gathered their meager luggage, a back pack each, and went to the lobby to check out. Lazarus inquired about the shuttle to the airport. He was told that it would be back in about fifteen minutes. Sam was very cautious with his next question.

"Ah, Eli, I don't think we can get on a plane."

Lazarus knew what he was worried about. They both had their handguns with them. Lazarus shook his head, "Don't worry, Sam, we aren't going to be flying to our destination."

Sam thought about it for a moment, then asked, "Rental car?"

Lazarus nodded, "yeah, rental car."

They hopped onboard the airport shuttle and settled in for the quick ride to the airport. Lazarus pointed out the three cars the ATF agents were using to trail the shuttle. Twenty minutes later, they were at the counter in front of Dollar rental cars. Lazarus rented the cheapest car available, which was also the smallest. They walked out to the parking garage where the cars were located, and walked down the rows until they found the numbered parking spot until they found their rental car. As they walked, Lazarus noticed two shadows following them. Johnston was making sure that they weren't going to escape his surveillance. Lazarus had no doubt that one of the ATF agents was talking to the rental agent right now.

Sam wasn't too happy about the comfort factor. It was a Dodge Dart. He and Lazarus deposited their bags into the back seat. Sam opened up the door and looked dubiously into the interior. He had trouble folding his legs so that he could fit into the front seat. The car listed to one side as his bulk settled. He was a man built for trucks.

"Eli, please tell me we aren't going too far in this rental. If I have to ride all the way to Arizona in this skateboard, I can't be held responsible for my actions."

Lazarus grinned at his companions discomfort, "Oh hush, you big baby. Don't worry, we won't be going too far in this car. I told you, I have a plan."

Sam frowned at the big baby comment.

Lazarus fired up the engine and they drove out of the parking garage. He drove towards the Interstate. He drove slowly, so that the ATF agents could keep up with them. He didn't want to spook them too soon. He wanted them to think he was on a short leash. He needed the element of surprise on his side.

They drove north and west away from the airport, and then Lazarus took a side street north off of Interstate 70 called Earth City Expressway North. He passed by an industrial area called Earth City. He made another turn to a smaller street, St. Charles Rock Road. He checked and made sure that he still had all three ATF cars behind him. They were trailing a little bit behind, but they were still with him.

"So, what's the plan?" Sam asked, "Are we just going to drive around the city all day?"

Lazarus smiled and shook his head, "No, we're driving to one of the oldest highways in North America. One that's been in use for thousands of years."

"A highway? In use for thousands of years? What the hell are you talking about?"

Lazarus pointed north through the buildings with a nod of his head. Off in the distance, the Missouri river waters rolled through to the Mississippi.

"I'm talking about a taking little cruise. We have a boat waiting."

"I didn't know there were docks around here."

Lazarus smiled, "There aren't. That's the point. No docks, no boats for the agents."

He slowed as he passed a semi-truck and trailer, and gave a wave. The semi pulled out as he drove past, blocking the road and the ATF agents. Lazarus hit the accelerator and drove like a demon down the road, then turned onto a smaller cut, a spur that headed down to the river.

"Get ready to bail. I'm going to hit the brakes, and you need to peel out of this car and run down to the boat waiting for us."

"Okay, but I'm gonna need a shoe horn to get my butt out of this car."

"You're young, you're limber. You'll make it."

The boat was there. Jean still had her blue hair. Lazarus had no doubt that it would be back to the normal brown before she had to face her parishioners tomorrow. He hit the brakes, and opened the car door. He turned around and grabbed his bag off of the back seat and tore out running for the boat. Sam had to use a different technique, one that wasn't quite as elegant. He opened the door, grabbed the roof, and pulled himself up and out of the car. He grabbed his bag, and was right on the heels of Lazarus.

The boat couldn't come all the way in to dry land, so they ran out into the water. The boat was pointed away from shore, and there was a ladder on the stern. Lazarus scrambled up like a monkey, threw his backpack onto the floor, turned around just in time to keep Sam's backpack from hitting him in the face. He caught the backpack, and threw it next to his. He leaned towards Sam as he was trying to get up the ladder. Lazarus lunged to grab him as he screamed, "Hit it."

The boat's engine roared to life as Jean rammed the throttle forward. Sam's eyes grew wide as he felt himself start to lose his grip on the ladder because of the sudden acceleration. Lazarus hooked his hands around Sam's arms, stabilizing him. Sam was able to hold on, but just barely.

As they sped away across the Missouri River, the ATF cars raced in and gravel flew as they braked hard next to the Dodge Dart. They boiled out of the cars. The agents pulled pistols, but the boat was well out of range. There was nothing they could do. They were out foxed, and they knew it. By the time they drove to the other side of the river, Sam and Lazarus would be long gone.

Lazarus helped Sam up over the side of the boat. Sam clambered on and was swearing as he climbed up, "Think you played that one a little bit close there, Eli?"

"Well, if we were slower, we'd still be in pistol range. Better for us to get the hell out of there."

Sam nodded, though he still wasn't too happy with his exit from the car and the entrance onto the boat. He just chalked it up to working with Eli.

Lazarus walked over to the pilot's chair, "I guess you got the message?"

Jean snorted, laughing, "Yeah. Things weren't too hard to set up, you had everything written out how you wanted to proceed. The hardest part was getting a boat to pick you up."

"I didn't know you had a boat license."

She said in a sarcastic, droll voice, "Well, I could involve my friend, who owns this boat, in a scheme that had the potential to get us arrested. Or I could get pointers from him and tell him that he didn't want to have any part of this. Guess which option I chose."

Lazarus nodded, "Yeah, you have a point."

Sam walked over, and Lazarus introduced him to Jean. Jean looked Sam over with an appraising eye. Her expression gave Lazarus the impression that Sam passed with flying colors. Sam noticed and blushed.

"My, my, what do we have here? Sexy hunk of man, and he blushes as well."

Lazarus laughed at the red on Sam's cheeks, "Sorry Sam, Jean is Methodist, which means she can marry. Not like your Catholic priests and nuns. Of course, Jean isn't like most of your Methodist pastors, either."

She laughed, "Chalk it up to my Irish Traveler upbringing." Jean leaned over and patted Sam on the arm, "If you're ever in the area again, come by, I'll take you out to dinner."

Sam was perplexed by Jean. Lazarus could see it on his face, "Come on now, Jean. Give him a little space. I don't think he's ever been hit on by a pastor before. It might take some time for him to get used to it."

Jean was attractive. Sam smiled at her, and nodded, "Certainly, Jean. The next time I'm out here, I'll make sure I don't have ATF agents on my trail, and I'll stop by and take you up on your offer."

Jean returned his smile, "You're on. I'll give you my number and you can give me a call when you're in Saint Louis again."

They rode the choppy waters across the Missouri to a small town. A few hundred feet from the edge of the river, Jean took off her wig and stuffed it into a bag. There was a dock with several boats tied up, and she maneuvered the boat into the slip. There was a man waiting there, and he tied the boat up expertly. Lazarus assumed he was the owner.

"Are you going to have problems with them tracking the registration of the boat?"

Jean shook her head, “No, not at all. The numbers you see aren’t the registration. Mike and I’ll put the real registration back on when you’re gone.”

Lazarus nodded, “Okay, whatever you need, you let me know. Thanks for the help.”

Jean laughed again, “Oh, don’t worry, you owe me. I have thirty seniors that want a trip to Israel. I’m thinking, you’re probably going to be footing most of that bill for me.”

Lazarus grinned, “Okay, I can do that.” He pulled out a card and handed it to Jean, “Call these people, and tell them that I authorized it. They’ll take care of the entire package for you, and get you a decent guide to take you around Israel.”

Jean leaned over and handed him the keys to the van. “It’s on the street. Just walk up, you can’t miss it.”

Jean gave him a hug for goodbye. She gave Sam a peck on the cheek. He and Sam walked up the street to find the van. The town had seen better days. The economy was a struggle for many small towns, and more than one had to reinvent itself to be relevant to the new realities.

They found the van, and pitched their bags inside. Sam settled into the driver’s seat, and Lazarus thought he heard a sigh as Sam buckled up.

“I thought you didn’t like this van?” he asked.

Sam turned his head towards Lazarus, “At least it’s not a Dodge Dart. I have room to move around in this.” Lazarus laughed.

“So, you think we’ll see the ATF agents again?”

Lazarus nodded, “Yeah, I’m pretty sure it’s going to happen. I don’t think Mephistopheles is going to give up that easily.”

Sam agreed, “I don’t think Agent Johnston was too happy with the outcome today. I get the feeling we’ll tangle with them again.”

“You’re right, and it’ll probably happen when it’s most inconvenient.”

“Come on, Eli, do you expect anything else? You expecting a walk in the park or something?”

Lazarus shook his head, “No, I’ve learned that’s never going to happen in my life. I’d never get that lucky.”

“Yeah, so let’s not worry about them until we have to.”

Lazarus shrugged, “Yeah, I guess so. Hey, enough talking. Fire up the engine and let’s get out of here. They may not look for us, but let’s not give them an easy target if they do.”

“Alright boss man, where to next?”

“Well, let’s drive straight north for about thirty minutes, that way we’re away from the river. Then we can start heading west again. We need to drive to Kansas City. I have to make a pit stop with the guy that makes my bullets.”

Sam fired up the engine, checked traffic, and pulled away from the sidewalk. He found a rural road that headed north, and took it. He didn’t know where it led to, but they could readjust. Like all rural roads, it had to hit a small town somewhere. From there, they should be able to find another road leading west.

“We need more ammunition? I thought we had plenty.”

“Yeah, we have enough conventional bullets to start our own war. But I need some special bullets.”

“What’re you thinking on that one?”

“Well, I think that we not only have to worry about Lilith and whatever she’s going to drag us into, but we have to worry about Mephistopheles and whatever he has planned. So, we have at least two demons, and their possessed to contend with. On top of all that, we have to worry about this third entity. Oh, and the other dimensional beings as well, whose capabilities I know nothing about.”

“So you think we need some more of your special ammunition. The frangible ammunition with silver in it.”

Lazarus nodded, “Yeah, but I went a bit further with this. I didn’t know what we’d be facing, so it has silver, gold, platinum, and palladium in it. Oh, and I had it all blessed, and dipped into holy water. And hand grenades. I have a case of hand grenades as well. If that doesn’t do the trick, nothing will.”

Sam looked over at Lazarus and thought about the implications. He could see that Lazarus was worried. Lazarus being worried, worried him. Lazarus had been fighting the forces of evil for two millennia. If he was going to these elaborate lengths to prepare for what might be coming at them, then it was possible that there was no walking away from it. He was kidding when he told Lazarus that they would be surrounded by targets. Now he wasn’t so sure it was a laughing matter anymore.

Chapter 8

Kansas City Fry Cook.

They turned west in the town of Winfield, drove a while, then turned south to Interstate 70. It was late by the time they got to Kansas City. They stopped on the Missouri side, found a hotel, and went out to sample some of the local barbeque. Lazarus made Sam drive around to several different places to pick up sandwiches. Sam was happy to do this. Kansas City was prime country for barbeque. There were so many cooks with their own recipes, it would be a crime not to try as much as they possibly could. They went back to the hotel, stuffed. It wasn’t hard to fall asleep.

They woke up early, and met downstairs at the van. They drove out of the hotel parking lot, found a Waffle House and pulled in for breakfast. They walked in and sat down at one of the booths. The waitress looked like she had taken orders when JFK was still president. She had a voice that sounded like she smoked three packs a day. Sam ordered his hash browns all the way, and had scrambled eggs to go with them. Lazarus ordered an omelet, with his hash browns plain.

Sam stared at Lazarus in amazement. “That’s just un-American,” Sam proclaimed.

“What?” Lazarus asked.

“Your hash browns, Eli. You’re at a Waffle House. You have to at least get them smothered and covered.”

Lazarus shook his head, “No I don’t. I like my hash browns plain.”

Sam was stunned at the cultural insensitivity of his friend, "I bet if you were in Paris, you wouldn't ask them to hold the pate or the caviar because you don't like it."

Lazarus nodded, "Yeah, you're probably right. You know why? Because I happen to like pate and caviar."

Sam looked at Lazarus as if he had just sneezed on the Mona Lisa, "You just don't understand."

Lazarus spread his hands, "What do I not understand, Sam?"

Sam forked a thumb over his shoulder at the cook, "This man is an artist. You stifle his creativity. Waffle House hash browns is an art form that needs to be expressed. When you order them without the extras, it's like asking to see the Elgin Marbles without the horses."

Lazarus gazed at Sam, surprised. It wasn't the impassioned plea about the hash browns. Lazarus was stunned that Sam knew anything at all about the Elgin Marbles. Sam wasn't exactly an art aficionado.

"What?" Sam asked.

Lazarus conceded the point to Sam. He looked at the waitress and asked for the hash browns to be smothered and covered. Sam sat back and smiled, very pleased with himself, "So, have you talked to your supplier?"

Lazarus waved the question away, "You make him sound like he's delivering heroin."

Sam waved his fork and talked around a mouthful of hash browns, "Whatever. Have you talked to him yet?"

In fact, Lazarus had talked to him. He used one of the burner phones and set up the meet a little after breakfast, in a small town that lay south of Kansas City. The drive wasn't far, about thirty minutes. With the ATF on his heels, he wanted to practice due diligence and ensure that they wouldn't be interrupted. They would drive a counter-surveillance route before they drove to the meet location.

"Yeah, I have the location. It shouldn't take long to get there."

"You think our friends from St. Louis might complicate things?" Sam asked.

"Probably not. This guy is strictly legit. He flies so far under the radar, I doubt anybody knows about him. He doesn't do jobs for other people. I'm the only person that he works for. I pay him a salary to make sure that he doesn't need to stray. The last thing I need is for him to be targeted. That would be bad for operations. He gets paid out of an account in Vanuatu."

"I didn't know Vanuatu was a financial center."

"It's not, that's the point."

They finished breakfast, and the waitress put a ticket down in front of Lazarus. Sam looked up and asked, "Where's my ticket?"

The waitress pointed back at the elderly guy that cooked the food. The cook had faded tattoos up and down his arms, and wore an old, button down, yellowed shirt that may have been white at one time. The cook looked over and waved.

"Don't worry about it, honey. Earl paid your check. He's never been called an artist before. Said it'll probably never happen again in his lifetime."

Sam waved over his shoulder at the cook. The cook smiled and nodded back. The teeth were stained yellow from years of cigarettes and coffee. Sam didn't have

to pay for his meal, so he left a ten dollar tip in two fives, one for the waitress and one for the cook.

They climbed into the van. They both had coffee to go. Lazarus drank his as he gave Sam directions to the meet location. A thirty minute counter-surveillance route, and then they drove to the meet. They got there an hour after they left the Waffle House. The meet location was in an old tobacco barn. They pulled the van into the barn, and a pickup truck was parked to one side.

A man was pulling cases out of the bed of the pickup truck. The guy was medium height, average build with a spare tire around the waist. He was losing what little hair he had in a strange balding pattern that left hair in the middle of his forehead. He wore blue jeans and had on a red and black patterned flannel coat.

Lazarus and Sam stepped out of the van into the chill of the afternoon. Even with the colder air, the smell of cured tobacco lingered, the essence steeped deep into the old, musty wood.

Lazarus introduced him to Sam, "Sam, this is Micah Winthrop. Micah, this is Sam Diabo."

Micah drew back at Sam's last name, "Diablo, like Spanish for the devil?"

Sam shook his head, "No, Diabo." He spelled it out, "D, I, A, B, O."

The guy smiled, "Oh, okay, sorry, my hearing isn't what it used to be. I guess I've spent too much time shooting rounds down range."

They shook hands, and Micah winced at Sam's grip. Sam smiled and pulled back on the pressure, "Nice to meet 'cha."

"Nice to meet you. Quite a grip you've got there."

Small talk continued as they worked. They pulled the remaining cases of ammunition out of the pickup truck and placed them into the van. Sam continued with the cases that were stacked next to the pickup truck and began loading them. Lazarus and Micah were talking about the bullet specifications.

"Yes sir, I made sure that everything you wanted in the bullets was present. I made sure that the precious metals were a very fine powder. I experimented with different ranges of the metals, and modified these bullets so that they shatter easily once they penetrate the body."

"You have the different calibers I asked for?"

"Yes sir. I brought you 5.56, 7.62, .338 Lapua, .45 and 9mm. Three thousand of each of the rifle calibers and five hundred each of the pistol calibers."

"Good. Thank you for your help. I really do appreciate everything. Oh, for the .338 Lapua, I need it sent to this address. Do me a favor and send it overnight."

"No problem sir. If it weren't for you, my family wouldn't eat. I appreciate your business."

"What about the blessing of the Monsignor?"

"Well, I gave him a call, and he told me that you had already talked to him about this. So, when the bullets were finished, I called him back. He came over, dipped them in holy water, and blessed them all."

"Fantastic, thank you."

"Thank you, sir. But, I added a little something as well. Something you didn't ask for."

Lazarus stopped, and studied Micah, wondering where this was going, “Something I didn’t ask you to do?”

Micah nodded, “Yes sir. This seemed above and beyond what your usual specifications called for, so I added a small cross to each bullet. I did it before the Monsignor blessed the bullets. I have a laser engraver, so I was able to just impress the shape of the cross on the bullets without decreasing any ballistic integrity. I tested them myself to make sure there was nothing that might interfere with the flight of the bullet. Here, let me show you.”

He pulled a few rounds out of his pocket. He handed them to Lazarus and Sam. They looked at the bullets. Sure enough, there was the faint impression of a cross on the bullets. Lazarus ran his finger over the impression, but it wasn’t deep enough for his fingers to feel it.

“Wow, I can’t feel it at all.”

Micah nodded, “Yes sir. I didn’t want the air to drag on the cross, which would decrease your accuracy.”

Lazarus put his hand on Micah’s shoulder, “Thank you, old friend. You are truly a craftsman.”

Micah blushed at the praise. Sam finished transferring cases from the truck to the van. Lazarus pulled five cashier’s checks made out for amounts around four thousand each, some a little bit more, some a little bit less, “This should take care of the cost of the materials. Let me know if you need more.”

Micah nodded, “Yeah, the amount is perfect. That shouldn’t raise any concerns with the bank.”

Lazarus agreed, “Just make sure that you don’t deposit them all in the same month. Your regular payment will be sent to you as well.”

Micah thanked Lazarus, climbed into his pickup truck and drove out of the tobacco barn.

Sam watched him go, “Wow, what an incredibly nice guy. He got this order done real quick for you.”

“Yeah, and he’s a very, very smart man as well. He has a Bachelor’s degree from Cornell and a Master’s degree from MIT, both in material’s science. I’ll take you to his work shop when we’re done with this. Believe me, it’s pretty amazing, geared to produce what I need for operations. Highly automated, it can knock out five thousand rounds in a half day of work.”

“Why’s he working for you? With degrees like that, I’d think he’d be working in the private sector and making a lot of money.”

Lazarus smiled at Sam, “Well, working for me is the private sector, and yes, he does make a lot of money. Plus, there’s an added advantage. Nobody knows where he is. He ran into some problems back in Boston. He saw something he shouldn’t have.”

“Yeah, what’s that?”

“He saw people from the Irish Mob kill some rival gang members: wrong place, wrong time. Worse than that, he saw the cops that were working with the Irish. So, he had to find a place that he could hide out.”

“How’d he find you?”

“He’s a good Protestant. He went to his pastor, and his pastor knew some people, who knew some people that knew me. I was able to get him and his family

out of there before the bad guys could find him. Then I paid a visit to the bad guys.”

They covered the extra ammunition with more blankets. Sam had to move things around to make sure everything was hidden, “I think we’re going to need more blankets. We’re starting to get a pretty big stack of weapons and ammunition here.”

Lazarus looked at the stack that was growing in the van, “Yeah, I think you’re right. Good thing we only have a few more stops.”

Sam closed the back door, and started towards the driver’s side. Lazarus walked around to the passenger side, opened up the door, and slid in. Sam opened his door, pulled the key out of his pocket, and slid in behind the wheel. He put the key in the ignition, turned over the motor, and looked expectantly at Lazarus.

“Were we goin’ to next?” Sam asked.

Lazarus looked straight ahead, not meeting Sam’s eyes, “You’re not going to like it.”

“Well, there are a lot of things I don’t like, but I’m a professional. What now?”

“Our next stop is Tulsa.”

“What do you want to get there? You know the next weapons pick up from my guys is in Amarillo, right?”

“Not what, Sam, who. We have to pick up Lilith.”

Sam’s hands tightened on the steering wheel until his knuckles turned white. Lazarus was afraid he was going to break the steering wheel. A mask descended on Sam’s face. The handsome, craggy faced man disappeared, and a bleak, dangerous man appeared. It was a face of death and fury. It was a face that made the blood of hard, dangerous men turn cold.

“You okay, big guy?”

Sam nodded, “Yeah, I got it under control.”

He looked over at Lazarus, and saw the concern on his face, “Don’t worry, I’m not gonna snap. I’m a professional. I’ll get the job done. Mission first.”

Lazarus studied him for a good long minute. Then he nodded, “Okay, I know. I trust you. I think you’re the only one I could trust with this.”

Sam took a deep breath. The bleakness disappeared, the death mask pulled back, and Sam was once again the man who dropped bits of cheese to his cat. He shrugged, “Yeah, we’ll get this done. I don’t want to do anything to make this any harder than it already is.”

“Yeah, this deal is already sour, no reason to curdle the milk.”

“Alright, I’ll just have to pretend I don’t want to rip her apart with my bare hands,” Sam turned and smiled at Lazarus, “It’s 106 miles to Chicago, we got a full tank of gas, half a pack of cigarettes, it’s dark, and we’re wearing sunglasses.”

Lazarus smiled back at him, “Oh man, great movie”

Sam looked at him, expectantly. It took Lazarus a moment, “Oh, right. Hit it!”

Sam shook his head, “No, good quote, but the wrong one.”

Lazarus was confused, “Isn’t that what Jake says to Elwood?”

Sam nodded his head, “Yeah, it is, but that’s not the quote I’m looking for.”

Lazarus thought about it, then comprehension dawned on his face, “Ah, I understand now.”

Sam smiled and nodded. Lazarus supplied him with the quote he was looking for, "We're on a mission from God."

"Exactly," Sam put the van in gear and drove out of the barn towards Tulsa.

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It took them four hours to get to Tulsa. They drove down Interstate 35 and then took Highway 169. By the time they got there, it was already starting to get dark. They pulled into Embassy Suites off of Interstate 44 and spent the night. Lazarus woke up at seven and called Sam's room to make sure he was up. When they walked out, there was a light rain, and the moisture and cold settled into Lazarus, making him shiver. They had breakfast at an ancient diner, the parking lot filled with older cars and beat up pickup trucks. It was a working man's diner.

"What's with you and diners? You want to stop at every greasy spoon on the road." Sam asked.

Lazarus smiled. They ordered, and tucked into the omelets and home fries. Lazarus was still concerned with Sam's reaction yesterday, so he brought it up again. Lazarus put both hands on the table and looked at Sam, "You're sure you can do this?"

Sam looked back at him, "What, drive to the east side of Tulsa?"

Lazarus watched him, waiting.

Sam relented, then shrugged his shoulders, "Yeah, no problem. Don't worry, Eli. I understand what's at stake here. I can manage my grudge until we deal with this problem."

Lazarus relaxed. It was still a potentially explosive situation. Lazarus trusted Sam. The wild card was Lilith. He had no idea what she was up to. He just hoped that Lilith didn't do anything to goad Sam into an irrational action. She had that kind of effect on people.

Lazarus left a tip on the table, and went to the cash register to pay. Sam went outside to the van and started it up. Lazarus studied Sam through the window. Sam looked up and caught Lazarus watching him, and smiled wanly, knowing that Lazarus was still worried about him.

"Is that all you need, sugar?" the waitress asked him. He nodded and paid the bill.

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Lazarus gave Sam directions as he drove. The light rain stopped, and they drove through the puddles on the street. They pulled onto a smaller side road off of Yale Avenue. The house they pulled up to was an older one. It had rose bushes on the sides and a porch that ran across the entire front of the house. Three steps ran up to the porch. There was a two person swing at one end. The house was well kept.

Lazarus saw Lilith standing outside on the walkway leading from the house to the street.

"Is that her?" Sam asked.

Lazarus nodded, "Yeah, that's her."

She had changed her style, but she was stunning. She was much more punk now. She was still a red head, but it was a pixie haircut, with slicked back hair, much shorter than it had been in New York. She was wearing tight black jeans,

with well-worn Doc Martins, and a stylish motorcycle jacket. She had a large bag to match her ensemble hanging off of one shoulder. The clothes were very tight, showing off her body to maximum effect. It was amazing how well the tight jeans showed off her figure. She shifted her weight, and Lazarus had a primal, visceral feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Lazarus glanced over at Sam. He could tell that she was effecting Sam as well. It was hard to tell if he was attracted to her, or if he just wanted to kill her. Lazarus knew though, violence and sexual attraction was a very fine line when Lilith was involved. Lilith saw them. She nodded at them. Evidently she was a tough guy now. A stylish, tough guy, but a tough guy nonetheless.

They pulled up to the sidewalk. Sam put it into park, and Lazarus opened his door. He walked over to Lilith, "What's up."

Lilith looked at him, amusement on her face, "Not much. How are you? Ready for this?"

Lazarus shook his head, "No, not at all."

Lilith smirked, "Oh, don't be such a spoil sport. It's not going to kill you to spend time with me."

Lazarus looked straight ahead, "I'm not too sure about that last part. I'm not the person to worry about, though. You might want to consider towing the line while we're together." He hooked a thumb towards the van. Behind him, Sam's large bulk peeled out of the driver's seat, and began the climb towards the sky as he stood up. He had taken his coat off, to be comfortable while he drove. He was wearing a very tight, long sleeve shirt that clung to his muscularity. Lilith's eyes widened as he walked around the front of the van.

"My, my, what a," she bit her lip, "healthy looking, young man." She was visibly impressed, "Where did you find him?"

A sardonic smile curled Lazarus' lips, then disappeared, "In New York."

Lilith shivered, her excitement causing the tip of her tongue to appear, "I don't know where you've been hanging out in New York, but I think I need to expand my horizons."

Lazarus shook his head, "I don't think so. If you go near him or his family, you won't survive the encounter. He's been hanging out with me for a while. He knows about you, and your friends."

Disappointment played across her face, "You're no fun."

"It's not my fault you're an evil demon whose minions like to sacrifice children to prove their loyalty to you."

"I've never asked anybody to hurt a child."

Lazarus glared at her, hard, "But you didn't stop them either."

She started to play the hurt damsel, but reconsidered.

Sam walked up, and brushed his bangs back, which immediately fell back into place.

Lazarus introduced them, "Sam, this is Lilith. Lilith, this is Sam."

Lilith held her hand out, and Sam took it in his gigantic mitt. Lilith was impressed again, "Wow, big hands," A sultry look slipped onto her face, and looked into Sam's eyes, "You know what they say about men with big hands."

Sam nodded, "Yeah, it means I have big gloves. Which sucks, because they cost more."

Lilith's seductive face went blank. Lazarus laughed. Lilith shot a venomous look at him. Sam smiled at her, and continued to hold her hand, though she tried to pull away. She looked up into his face. Sam leaned forward, putting his face closer to hers, "It won't work. I know who, and what, you are."

"Should I be worried?" she asked, her expression indicating that she was far from worried.

Sam shook his head, "No, not yet. Not on this mission."

She thought about it, "And after?"

Sam didn't say anything, he just smiled. The mask was back. That mask took away the large, irascible young man. In his place, death incarnate appeared. It had one hell of an effect on Lilith. Her eyes grew wide, and her face and body grew very still. Lazarus knew that there wasn't a whole lot that could put fear into Lilith. She was a predator, who hunted and killed where she chose. Right now, though, she looked like a deer caught in the headlights, and the semi was fast approaching.

Sam leaned back, and once again, the death mask was gone and the handsome, young man was back. He let go of Lilith's hand. She unconsciously moved back out of his reach.

"So, you got luggage?" he asked. She nodded and pointed towards the porch. Sam walked past her to grab the bags. She watched this force of nature move up to the porch and grab two duffle bags. Sam took them to the van, opened up the back, and put them in. He walked past her again to the porch to grab two rolling suitcases.

She watched him as he walked from the van to the porch and back. She wasn't sure how to handle Sam. Men adored her, lusted after her, and desired her. With Sam though, there was none of that. It was as if she didn't exist at all, let alone as a desirable, sexual, sensual, woman. He was the first that was able to completely shut her out. She was intrigued. Lazarus cleared his throat. She turned back towards him, the spell broken.

She looked over at Lazarus. She even had an effect on Lazarus. She knew it. She could see it in his face and his body language when he was around her. Her body was a memory that his couldn't forget. Lazarus could shut her out. His physical and psychological responses had been pushed down as far into his psyche as possible, buried under two thousand years of active animosity towards her. The memories were still there, though. He would never be able to push that aside.

Sam walked past with the two suitcases, and put them into the back of the van. He walked back to Lilith and Lazarus, "Is that all of your luggage?"

Lilith didn't try the seduction again. Her body language had changed completely, knowing that her attempts to seduce were wasted. Instead, she was all business, "Yeah, that's everything."

Lazarus spread his hands, "I thought there was someone else with you?"

She looked around, back at the house, and nodded, "Yes, she's on her way. She's in the house, saying goodbye to her parents."

"Her parents? How old is she?"

Lilith turned to look at him. She had a coquettish smile on her face, "Don't worry, my protégé is not a child."

Lazarus scowled. He didn't know what Lilith had planned. He knew that she would use any weakness against them. He was lucky that Sam was stoic, Spartan in outlook. With Sam on his team, they could handle almost anything. He knew Lilith though. Her style was indirect. She would give options, ones that would lead them down the wrong path if chosen incorrectly. This point seemed to be confirmed when the door opened.

The door opened and Lilith's protégé walked out. She backed out, as she talked to her parents. Which was fine. Lazarus could honestly say she looked as good walking away as she did walking towards them. She had honey blond hair pulled back into a French braid. She was in her early twenties. Where Lilith was all punk, she was the all American girl. She was around five feet seven, about one hundred thirty pounds, definitely taller and maybe heavier than Lazarus. She was lean, but with a figure that men would definitely notice. She was dressed in blue jeans, and an old style bomber jacket with World War Two Flying Tiger patches on it. She had on Converse All Star high tops in red and white. She turned, and smiled at them, white teeth against tanned skin. The clouds disappeared as her smile lit up the day. Her parents stepped out on the porch behind her.

"Here now, you're not going without a hug and a kiss, girl," her father said.

The young woman turned and gave them both hugs and kisses. Her mother turned to Lilith, "You need to come up here as well. You're not going away without telling us goodbye."

Lilith's mask was firmly in place when she sprang up the steps. She hugged the mother, "Don't worry, Maggie, I'll take good care of her."

The father tried to look stern, and failed, "you'd better take care of her. I'm counting on you."

As the three women talked on the steps, the father walked down and introduced himself to Lazarus and Sam, hand out to shake, "hello, my name is Clive."

Lazarus took the hand, "Hi, my name is Eli Bethany, and this is my friend Sam Diabo." Lazarus heard a slight accent in Clive's speech, but he couldn't quite place it.

Clive took Sam's hand and shook it as well, though he seemed concerned about the large man in front of him, "You take good care of my little girl, okay. Ordinarily I would be dead set against this, but since Lilith vouches for you, I'm willing to let Darcy go. I understand you're only going to be gone for a few days?"

Lazarus nodded, "Yes, she'll be back to you in about five days. Not too long. A quick road trip down to Arizona, and then we'll be back." Lazarus appraised the man in front of him, "Clive's an unusual name around here."

Clive nodded, "Yes, I'm a transplant. I'm originally from Chicago, where my parents settled. I met Maggie there at the University of Chicago, and we came back to her home. But my family's actually from Bermuda. I spent my summers down there."

"Don't tell them too many boring stories, Clive," Darcy said from the porch. Clive turned to see Darcy and Lilith start down the steps. Darcy skipped down the steps and walked towards them with a youthful, coltish grace. Lazarus could see the beautiful woman that she was going to grow into. Darcy hugged her father as she passed him. Clive returned the hug, and then walked back up the steps to his wife, and put his arm around her waist. Darcy stopped in front of Lazarus, and

eagerly held her hand out in an unassuming, almost childish angle, fingers pointed down towards the ground, “Hi, my name’s Darcy.”

Lazarus held his hand out, and took hers, trying to stifle the urge to bend and kiss her hand. He lost. He took her hand and gently turned it to kiss it across the knuckles, “Enchanté.”

Her eyes grew big, and the smile on her face turned shy. From the steps, Clive said, “That will be quite enough of that, thank you.”

Lazarus straightened and smiled at her father, “As you wish.”

Lilith completed the introductions, “Darcy, this is Eli. Eli, this is Darcy. Darcy, the hulking mountain behind Eli is Sam. Sam, this is Darcy.”

Lazarus leaned back, and watched as Sam moved forward to shake Darcy’s hand. Sam took her hand, and stammered, “Ah, nice to meet you.” Darcy’s face grew still as she took in the stark, good looks of Sam Diabo.

Lazarus looked at Sam and Darcy, and saw the expressions on their faces. He looked over at Lilith. Lilith looked like the cat that ate the canary. Lazarus tipped his head towards her, “Touché.”

Lilith turned and grabbed Darcy’s arm, and walked her to the van. They chattered like high school BFFs.

Sam followed, and Lazarus leaned forward and put his hand in the center of Sam’s shoulders as he walked behind him. Sam looked back at him.

“Close your mouth, you’re going to attract flies.”

Sam opened his mouth to reply, thought for a second, looking a little muddled. He looked at Lilith and Darcy climbing into the back seat of the van. A sheepish expression crowded the befuddled look off of his face, “Ah, hell, she manipulated me like I was a three year old child.”

Lazarus nodded, “Yep, that’s what she does. She looks for an opening, and then exploits it.” He slapped the side of Sam’s arm with the back of his hand, “Don’t worry, I fell right into that trap as well. Darcy is quite disarming.”

Sam nodded, suddenly very aware of how easily his armor had been penetrated by the shy smile of a young woman. The look disappeared, “I wonder how far along the path she is.”

Lazarus shook his head, “There’s no way to know right now. I guess we’ll find out, as we spend more time with her.”

Emotion struggled across Sam’s face, “Do you think we can save her?”

Lazarus thought about it, “I don’t know. Lilith called her protégé, so that’s a very tough call.”

They walked over to the van. Sam peeled around the front. They opened the doors, and sat down.

“So, where do we go now?” Lilith asked, to the sound of shutting doors.

Lazarus turned around in his seat as Sam started the van, “Well, we have to drive to Amarillo. We have a meet out there to pick up some more munitions.”

“Munitions?” Darcy asked.

Lazarus glanced at Darcy, and then looked back at Lilith, “How much have you told her?”

Lilith patted Darcy’s hand, “I’ve told her everything about our mission. I didn’t explain your particular method of operations though.”

Darcy looked confused, “method? I thought they used magic, like we do.”

Lazarus shook his head, “No, we don’t use magic. That’s her specialty,” he nodded towards Lilith. Then he pointed at Sam using his chin, “We’re a little more hands on. We have some weapons in the back to use, and we plan on picking up a few more along the way.”

Darcy’s nose wrinkled, “You mean, like guns?”

Lazarus nodded, “Yes, guns.”

Darcy frowned, “Guns are dangerous.”

He looked at her, “And magic isn’t?”

Darcy looked confused, and looked at Lilith. Lilith smiled, “No, magic isn’t dangerous, not the way we do it.” She took Darcy’s hand in hers, and folded both her hands around it. Darcy smiled and looked back at Lazarus. Lazarus studied the two. The dynamics between them would be interesting to figure out. Darcy seemed to be innocent of the world at large, an ingénue. He didn’t know if she was truly an innocent, or if she was playing a part.

He nodded at her, “My associate and I don’t have your skills. We have to rely on something a little less esoteric to conduct our operations.” He smiled at her, “So we use weapons. We use knives, swords, handguns, shotguns, and rifles.”

Lazarus snapped his fingers, turned around, opened the glove box and pulled out a holstered Glock 17 with spare magazines. He turned back to Lilith, “Here’s the pistol you requested. Glock 17 in 9mm with three magazines.”

Lilith leaned forward, and took the pistol and magazines from Lazarus. She leaned back and put them into her purse. Darcy watched the gun pass from Lazarus to Lilith, at first with dismay on her face, and then with disdain. She frowned. Lilith noticed. She patted Darcy’s hands with her right hand, “We’ll talk about it later.” Lilith’s eyelids dropped slightly, indicating the point that he had just won.

Touché, he thought to himself, *One point for the good guys.*

Lilith continued, “It’s always good to have a backup plan. You never know what’s going to happen.”

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They stopped in Oklahoma City for lunch. It was a little bit early when they got there, but it wasn’t too much of a problem, and they were seated pretty quickly. Darcy and Lilith sat on one side of the booth, and Sam and Lazarus sat on the other. The waitress came and they all ordered drinks. Ten minutes later, they ordered their entrée’.

Lazarus decided to use the time to find out more about Darcy, “Your parents seem very nice.”

Darcy’s cheeks colored, “Thank you, but they aren’t my parents. They’re my aunt and uncle.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t know.” *That explains why she called them Maggie and Clive, instead of mom and dad*, he thought.

Darcy smiled at him, “Don’t worry, most people make that mistake. I lost my parents at a very young age, and Aunt Maggie, my mom’s sister, and her husband, my Uncle Clive, came back to Tulsa to raise me.” She had a faraway look in her eyes when she talked about her parents.

Lazarus' eyes clouded in sympathy, "I'm sorry. Do you mind if I ask what happened?"

She shrugged, "No, I don't mind. Nobody really knows. They just, sort of disappeared. I was very young when it happened."

"Disappeared?"

"Yes. They were there when I went to sleep, and when I woke up, I couldn't find them. The neighbors found me wandering outside asking for mom and dad."

"I'm sorry, I seem to be bringing up all sorts of bad memories."

"It's okay."

Lilith leaned forward and patted Darcy's hand. She looked over at Lazarus, "Don't worry, Eli, I've explained a lot of things to Darcy about you."

"Really, like what?"

Darcy looked at him, this time straight in the eyes, "I hear that you don't like witches."

"Maybe. Most witches that I've met have been involved in some terrible things."

"Lilith told me that you hunt covens, and kill witches."

"I have," he replied.

"How can you do that to people that are just trying to practice their religion?"

"Because their religion involves the ritual killing of innocent children."

Darcy was taken aback by this pronouncement. She glanced at Lilith. She wasn't expecting Lazarus to be so open about what he had done. She was expecting prevarication, not corroboration. Lazarus could tell that she wasn't expecting to hear that witches were killing children, either. Lazarus doubted that Lilith had told her the complete truth. More than likely, Lilith had colored the information to paint Lazarus in a very bad light. Evidently, what Lilith had been telling her had led her to make some conclusions about Lazarus that were probably not true. Darcy looked over to Sam, who confirmed by nodding his head in agreement with Lazarus.

"Well, let's go ahead and eat, shall we? We have a long drive ahead of us," Lilith didn't like the tack that the conversation had taken.

Darcy looked down at her plate. In a quiet, sad voice, she said, "But I'm a witch."

The conversation was suddenly over. They ate in silence after that, punctuated by the sound of knives and forks on ceramic.

Chapter 9

Daddy's at the Steak House.

They arrived in Amarillo eight hours later. Sam drove into the Amarillo Downtown Marriott Courtyard parking lot. They grabbed bags and walked into the lobby. Lazarus used one of his other identities and credit cards to get four rooms. Before the four went in different directions, Lazarus pulled Lilith aside, "I need to talk to you."

Lilith used her hand to tuck a lock of hair behind one ear, and smiled, "If you want to get me alone, you don't have to be so serious. I'm more than happy to meet you in your room, or mine."

"Stop playing the seductress. I have information that you need to know."

She studied his face, and he watched the conflicting motives on her face. He wondered what hidden agendas were concealed there. He knew her plans revolved around her desire to bring him back to her master. That would always be her main goal.

She acquiesced, "Okay, when do you want to meet?"

Lazarus looked at his watch, "How about six-thirty. We can have dinner together." He scrutinized her intently, "but, there won't be any collateral damage tonight. I'm not in the mood for your games."

She hesitated, and then nodded her agreement.

Sam and Darcy watched them as they talked. When Lilith nodded her head and accepted Lazarus' invitation, Sam turned to Darcy, "What about you? You up for some chow later on?"

Darcy looked up at Sam, then looked over at Lilith. Lilith gave a small nod. Darcy turned back to Sam, "Sure, I guess we can get dinner."

Lazarus knew what Sam was up to. Sam was going to try and get information from Darcy. Sam was an experienced interrogator, and when he turned on the charm, his dark, good looks and bad boy persona could elicit information better than anyone. Hopefully he'd be able to get Darcy to talk over dinner. Lazarus had a feeling that Sam had other motives as well. Lazarus couldn't blame him. Darcy was a lovely, young woman. Sam was a handsome, though large and dangerous, young man. Nature would take its course.

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He met Lilith downstairs in the lobby. She hadn't changed her clothes. Everyone in the lobby was staring at her. One man tried to talk to her, but she waved him off before he could get a word out. She saw Lazarus, strode forward and fell in beside him. They walked towards the door.

"There's a steakhouse halfway down the block. I thought we could eat there."

She didn't say anything. He enjoyed the silence, opening the door for her as they exited the building. It was cold outside, and Lilith crossed her arms against the chill. They walked down the sidewalk, and cars honked. Lazarus didn't have to look. He knew that every person was watching Lilith's mesmerizing stride.

Fifteen minutes later, they were at the steakhouse. Heads swiveled as they were escorted to their table. The men were jealous of Lazarus, and the women were jealous of the way their husbands and boyfriends looked at Lilith. Lazarus and Lilith took off their jackets, and placed them on the back of the chairs. Lilith's breasts strained against the flimsy material of the t-shirt she was wearing. Lazarus, and everybody else in the restaurant, was very aware that she wasn't wearing a bra.

It's very cold outside, Lazarus thought.

"Ya'll want some biscuits?" the waitress asked. She placed silverware and menus in front of them. She was in her mid-thirties, dressed in a gingham top, tight blue jeans, and boots.

“Butter?” Lazarus asked.

“Honey butter,” the waitress answered.

He smiled, “even better.”

“What do you want to drink?”

“I’ll take sweet tea.” He motioned towards Lilith, “What do you want?”

Lilith leaned back, drawing the fabric tight across her chest, “I’ll take sweet tea, also. Oh, and can you bring me a chardonnay?” The waitress noticed the strained fabric, and stammered as she told them she would bring the biscuits out with the tea.

Lazarus shook his head, “Do you have to do that?”

Lilith looked at him with a quizzical look on her face, “Do what?”

“Wind up everybody you meet?”

Lilith idly waved her hand as she read the menu, “It’s fun. Plus, I have a job to do. My work is never done. You know that. You’d be amazed at some of the offers I get. Strangely, I rarely have to work hard to glean souls for my master. They’re all so willing to walk that path with minimal guidance.”

Lazarus smiled at the waitress when she brought the biscuits and sweet tea back. She walked away, and he grabbed a biscuit and began buttering it, “Do you really need his approval that much?” The biscuit was warm and soft. The waitress came back with the chardonnay and placed it in front of Lilith.

She laughed as she picked up the glass of wine, “Oh, I think you misunderstand the situation. It’s not about my boss at all. I enjoy this.”

He made a circular motion with the butter knife, encouraging her to continue.

She leaned back against the chair, “It’s a good thing the boss likes what I’m doing. But it’s not about him.”

“And you don’t care about damning souls to hell for all eternity?”

Lilith shook her head, “If you think I’m the reason they end up there, you don’t understand humans. Every soul I’ve ever turned would still be headed down the same path. I’m just the facilitator. Like I said, I don’t tell them to sacrifice children. That’s their own sick fantasies floating to the surface. I don’t create the evil, I just take advantage of it. It’s already there, under the surface.”

She picked up a biscuit, and began eating. It was a good biscuit, and she slowed to enjoy it. She ate the entire biscuit, took a drink of chardonnay, and picked up another one. Lazarus pointed at the honey butter with his knife. She thought about it, picked up her butter knife and took a dab and spread it on the biscuit. She continued, “I like to think, it’s more about a job well done.”

Lazarus ate his biscuit, enjoying the softness, the heat, and the sweetness of the honey butter. He let her talk. The more she talked, the more he might learn. It would be a long time before he could talk to a demon about their power structure again. Any intelligence was good intelligence. Of course, a lot of what she was saying was complete nonsense. There was nothing human in her motivations. “I suppose it has nothing to do with beating the other demons? Nothing to do with the amount of souls that you divert from the righteous path?”

She considered this, “Well, I guess that’s part of it as well. It brings a certain amount of satisfaction. But the other demons are not even in the same league as I am. They don’t have the capabilities, the finesse that I do.”

“I think that Mephistopheles might disagree with you on that point.”

She stopped eating the biscuit, and placed it on the plate in front of her. Her demeanor changed. She was colder, the chill in her voice apparent, "When did you talk to Mephistopheles?"

Lazarus kept eating, enjoying the biscuit, and enjoying Lilith's reaction, "I ran into him in St. Louis. Or, maybe I should say, he tracked me to St. Louis, and I had a devil of a time getting rid of his agents. No pun intended."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I wanted to see your reaction when I mentioned his name."

She picked the biscuit back up, and then her butter knife. She put more butter on the biscuit, "And, he told you what?"

The waitress stopped by the table, "Do ya'll know what you want to eat yet?"

Lilith looked at Lazarus and asked, "Are you buying, Eli?"

"Yes, I'm buying," he replied.

Lilith ordered a New York strip, medium. Lazarus ordered a T-bone, well done. The waitress wrote down their orders and walked back to the kitchen to place them.

Lilith asked again, "What did Mephistopheles tell you?"

Eli was done with the biscuits. If he ate any more, he wouldn't be able to eat his steak. He placed the butter knife across the small plate.

"Well, Les was upset with you. He seems..."

Lilith held up her hand, stopping him, "Wait, what. Who's Les?"

"Mephistopheles. I call him Les. His name is too damn long to keep repeating."

Lilith was amused by Lazarus' explanation and laughed out loud, "Oh, that's rich. I bet he hated that. He is such a dilettante. He hates for anybody to be disrespectful to him."

Lazarus nodded, "Yeah, I got that."

There was delight in Lilith's eyes. Lilith was back to her old, seductive self. She ran her finger around the rim of the glass, and looked at Lazarus, her eyes filled with lust, "You are such a delight. It's amazing the way you make me laugh."

Lazarus dismissed the obvious invitation, "Sorry, you can put that right out of your mind. It's never going to happen again."

An indolent smile played across her lips, "Such a shame, I really enjoyed our time together. I wish we could re-live some of the good times we had."

"What say we get back to our previous subject? We were talking about Mephistopheles."

"Spoil sport. Okay, back to Mephistopheles. What did he have to say?"

The steaks arrived and they stopped until the waitress took away the old plates and put the new plates in front of them. They both cut into the steaks, and took a few bites before they began the conversation again.

"So, Mephistopheles," she paused, smirking, "or Les?" Lilith said, as a reminder.

Lazarus finished chewing, and swallowed, "Yes. Les was upset about you working on this project with me. He seems to think that you have ulterior motives not related to our current mission."

Lilith rolled her eyes, "of course I have ulterior motives. You know that."

Lazarus nodded, "Yes, I do. That's why I brought Sam along to watch my back. I don't trust anything you do."

“Exactly, that’s my point. You would be a fool to trust me to do what I say I’m going to do.”

Lazarus cut into his steak, “True, but I think he wasn’t talking about me. I think he was talking about your relationship with your boss.”

Lilith stopped cutting her steak, placed the knife and fork on the plate, “What, he thinks I’m going to betray the Great Deceiver, the master of intrigue? How the hell is that even possible?”

Lazarus sat back and interlocked the fingers of his hands. He pondered for a moment, and then spread his hands apart, “I don’t know. Maybe by working with the enemy?”

Lilith shook her head, “So, I betray my boss by working with an entity from another reality? That doesn’t make sense. I’ve worked hard to get to where I’m at. If I work with another boss, I just go to the bottom, and have to work my way back up. You know, prove myself again. Right now, I’m on top. There are no others even close. The boss is pretty happy with me. So, better the devil you know. No pun intended.”

Lazarus nodded. He didn’t believe her, and told her so, “You know that I don’t believe a word that you’re saying.”

Lilith smiled, “Oh, of course. You would be a very foolish man if you did. One thing you’ve proved to me over the years, Eli, is that you’re not foolish at all. If you were, you wouldn’t still be alive.”

Lilith took another bite of steak, “So, if you aren’t prepared to believe me when I tell you that I’m not prepared to betray my boss on this mission, why did you tell me about Mephistopheles?”

Lazarus cut the last piece of steak from the bone, and put it into his mouth. He chewed, enjoying the smoky taste. He swallowed, and then took a drink of sweet tea.

“Well, I thought it would be a very good idea to let you know about Mephistopheles, because it might cause dissension between two major demons. Also, I thought you needed to know that he’s using ATF agents to track us.”

Lilith finished her steak, “Good point about the dissension. Good idea to let me know about the ATF agents as well. I assume we’ll probably see them again?”

Lazarus nodded, “Yeah, I think we may see them again pretty soon. We lost them in St. Louis, but it’s just a matter of time before they track us down. Sam and I have some heavy duty munitions that we have to pick up. I have no doubt that they’ll be on our trail.”

The waitress stopped by again, filled up the glasses with sweet tea, and asked Lilith if she wanted any more wine.

“No thank you, but since Eli is buying, what kind of desert do you have?” Lilith asked.

The waitress left and came back with two desert menus. Lilith oohed and aahed about the various deserts, then settled on a decadent brownie with vanilla ice cream and a maple syrup glaze. Lazarus decided he might as well get a dessert, and ordered apple pie a la mode, with coffee.

Lilith started talking about Mephistopheles again, “He’s always been jealous of me. He hasn’t done anything original since he convinced the Catholic Church that it needed Quaestores to go around and sell indulgences in the Middle Ages. That

brought us a lot of Bishops. Avarice is an amazing thing. Then Martin Luther had to go and spoil everything for him. He hasn't come up with a good idea since. I don't know why the boss keeps him around."

"So, you two have a competition for the Deceiver's attention?" Lazarus asked. He was trying to keep Lilith talking, trying to get some insight into the workings of the political power struggles in Hell.

Lilith nodded, "It's all about getting attention. We constantly compete. If we don't get attention for our successes, we get attention for our failures. I can guarantee that you don't want the boss's attention for failures. Not a good idea at all. And, Mephistopheles seems to be getting a lot of attention for his failures, lately."

Lazarus decided to let the other shoe drop, "You know, it seems I've been having a lot of success lately with tracking your operations."

Lilith took a sip of her tea. The waitress came back with their deserts and Lazarus' cup of coffee.

"Yes, you do seem to have insights into my operations. I've wondered about that."

Lazarus nodded, "It seems that Mephistopheles may have had something to do with some of my intelligence successes."

Lilith had taken a bite of brownie and ice cream on her spoon, and was about to put it into her mouth. She stopped and stared at Lazarus. He could see the anger flash into her eyes. He could understand her ire. It was one thing to have your sworn enemy fight against you and win battles. It was quite another thing to be betrayed from within your own organization. She recovered from her momentary lapse, and put the brownie and ice cream in her mouth.

"Oh, wow, this is really good."

Lazarus took a bite of his apple pie and ice cream, then followed it with a drink of coffee. The coffee was very hot, but it complemented the apple pie a la mode perfectly.

Lilith played with her desert, trying different combinations of brownie, ice cream, and maple topping, "You know, I may have to review my organization and see what's going on, now that you've told me about Mephistopheles."

"Afraid you might have a loyalty problem?" he asked.

She didn't say anything. She kept eating her brownie. "If what you're telling me is true, and I find out it is, I think the boss may have some things to talk to Mephistopheles about."

Lazarus smiled. He might lose some information in the short run, but having two major demons fighting each other would be a coup for him. "I think you might just be jealous of Mephistopheles. Does he get to spend more time with the boss?"

She waved the spoon, negating his statement, "No, I don't have any problems with the boss. The others know their place. I guess I just have to remind Mephistopheles where his is."

"You sound like a bunch of children trying to compete for the attention of daddy."

Lilith stared into space after he said that. Then she shivered, and spoke loud enough for others in the room to hear, "Mmmm, daddy. I like the idea." She looked into his eyes, "If you want to spank me, I could call you daddy."

Lazarus' body responded to her invitation. It was instinctual, visceral. Lilith was incredibly desirable. Men would, and had, given up their souls for one night with her. Lazarus struggled with his physical reaction and took another sip of coffee. He wasn't going to give her the satisfaction.

The entire restaurant was suddenly quiet, however, with all of the men, and some of the women, contemplating the visual that Lilith had just supplied. Lazarus took another bite of his apple pie. Slowly, the sounds in the restaurant returned as the sexual tension ebbed. Everyone seemed to have woken from a spell. In a way, Lazarus guessed they had.

They finished their deserts. They stood, and Lazarus put bills on the table for the tip. They walked over to the hostess, and Lazarus paid the bill. Lazarus opened the door for Lilith. The rain was gone, but there was now a fine mist. If they hurried, they would be able to get back to the hotel before the rain started again.

They walked. Lilith was in a much better mood on the way back to the hotel. She linked an arm through his, and he didn't pull away from her. He deluded himself, imagining that he was just going along to get along. The touch of her body against his gave him an intense thrill.

She knew it would. "I could get used to this again," she said.

There was a screech of brakes as one car tried to keep from rear ending another. Somebody had been distracted by Lilith, and had taken his eyes off the road. She had that effect on the humans around her. Lazarus kept fighting an internal struggle against this force of nature. She put her head on his shoulder. It was a long walk back to the hotel. Lazarus took a very cold shower when he got there.

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Around nine o'clock, well after he finished his shower, Lazarus heard a knock on the door. He pulled on pants and a shirt, and grabbed his Springfield HD, and held it behind him as he answered the door. Sam was standing outside, in the hallway. Lazarus motioned him in, and placed the pistol next to the TV as he walked past it. He motioned Sam to the chair, and Lazarus sat on the bed.

"So, how was your date?"

Sam sat down, and leaned back into the chair, "I'm thinkin' I could ask you the same thing."

Lazarus smiled at the thought, "I think that ship has sailed. In fact, I fervently hope that ship has sailed."

"You guys go to the steak house?" Sam asked.

Lazarus nodded, "Yeah, I was in the mood for a steak. What about you two?"

"Arby's. I had the corned beef, and she had the roast beef and cheddar."

"What do you think about her?"

"Well, Darcy likes the Horsey sauce, which is pretty bold for a woman. Not too many women like the Horsey sauce. I always thought that was more of a guy kind of thing."

Lazarus waited for Sam to continue. Sam got the message, "Hey, I'm just trying to lighten the mood."

"Consider it lightened."

"Spoil Sport."

"Lilith says the same thing about me."

“Okay, I’ll get down to brass tacks. I like Darcy. She’s smart, though incredibly naïve about the way the world works. Lot of humanist stuff floating around upstairs. Probably got a lot of it in college. Don’t try to talk about the demon stuff to her. She just doesn’t believe there’s a heaven or hell. She doesn’t believe in God. And, if there was a God, then she definitely wouldn’t be a man. A man isn’t nurturing enough to create the world that we have. She’s too politically correct to believe any classical teachings about good and evil. But she seems nice. I think she’s a sweet girl. And, very, very smart. Wicked smart. Straight A’s in nursing and radiology. I just don’t know how Lilith has her hooks into her.”

“Don’t get too carried away. She may not be what she seems. She may be toying with you to divert your attention away from what’s important here.”

“What, you think Lilith brought her along so that I’d think with the little head instead of the big head?”

“It’s happened before. It’s happened with men and women. It happened with me two thousand years ago. A beautiful woman can distract a man.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Did she tell you anything about magic, or her relationship with Lilith?”

“No, not so much. She told me she met Lilith at college. She ran into Lilith in one of her classes, thought she was funny and edgy, and they began hanging out together. Then Lilith showed her some magic, and they got started.”

Lazarus thought for a moment, “What do you mean, showed her some magic?”

Sam continued, “Well, Darcy showed me a few things, right there at the table.”

Lazarus digested this information, then poked a little fun at Sam, “What do you mean, showed you a few things? Really, right there on the table?”

Sam smiled at the joke, “Naw, not like that. I couldn’t get that lucky.”

Lazarus held up one hand, “Hey, watch yourself. Thou shalt not covet.”

Sam’s smile twisted, and sarcastically, he said, “Like you can claim that you’re innocent on that subject. Besides, she ain’t married.”

Lazarus thought back to the long, cold shower he had taken, and conceded Sam’s point, “Yeah, well. I’m only human.”

“So, no, not that, not right on the table either. I’m not in jail, so that didn’t happen. Naw, I’m talking about the magic thing. She showed me a few things about her magic.”

“Really? Did it seem genuine?”

“Yeah, she did what she called elemental magic. She created a walking figure with the salt. Used air to create a little tornado with the pepper. The she created a water spout in her water glass. And, she snapped her fingers, and sparks flew.”

Lazarus smiled again, “I bet they did. She’s a pretty girl.”

Sam shook his head, “What did Lilith do to you? You can’t keep your mind out of the gutter.”

Lazarus put his hands on his knees, “I think I need to take some time off when this is over, and go out on a few dates with some classy women.”

“I got an aunt that would love to spend some time out on the town.”

Lazarus smiled at the thought, “Maybe. We’ll talk about it when we get back from this mission.”

“She’s a classy lady. Pretty too. I’m not just sayin’ that ‘cause she’s my aunt.”

Lazarus held up a hand to stop Sam, "Alright, alright. Back to the now. I'd like to see some of Darcy's 'Elemental' magic. I can't believe she's as nice as you say she is if she's using demonic magic. Nice and demonic just don't go together as a normal juxtaposition."

"What about you and Lilith? Did you kiss and make up?" Sam asked.

"Ah, no. She did try to exploit the sex thing with me, though."

"How did that work out for you?"

"With me taking a cold shower and banging my head on the wall saying, 'Demon, Evil,' over and over again."

"Had to remind yourself, eh?"

"No, I'm fully conscious of who and what she is. It's been a long while since I've been with a woman, though. Plus, she knows what buttons to push, and how to push them."

"Yeah, and she's built like a Victoria's Secret model as well."

"I believe the term you're looking for is succubus, not model."

Sam laughed, "Victoria's Secret Succubus. I'm not sure they have that line of lingerie, Eli."

Lazarus smiled, "I have no doubt that it would be very popular during Halloween."

"Yeah, but I don't think it would just be for Halloween. It would be pretty popular all the time, especially if it came with Lilith."

Lazarus thought about it and shuddered, "I can just imagine what would happen to the world if there were more than one of her to cause chaos."

Sam grew serious, "Wow, yeah." He looked at Lazarus, "She's right, you are a wet blanket."

Lazarus shrugged, "It's who I am. Kind of hard for me to see the good in most situations."

"I can see that. You've been fighting against the bad guys for two thousand years. I can't even begin to imagine what you've seen and experienced."

Lazarus grew grim, "It wouldn't be so bad if the innocents weren't dragged into the middle."

Sam's eyes grew distant as he thought about Mikey. Lazarus noticed the change in Sam's demeanor, "I guess we better both keep our minds on our business, yes?"

Sam nodded, "Yeah, I guess we'd better. So, you hittin' the rack soon?"

"No, not yet. I'm going to do pistol and shotgun maintenance, and oil down Faith and Mercy. Then I'm going to hit the rack."

The surprise showed on Sam's face, "Whoa, you brought the Sisters with you? You're prepared for anything."

Lazarus nodded. The Sisters were the twin swords that had been given to him by the Archangel Michael. Lazarus didn't know where they came from, or who made them, but he had a strong feeling that Saint Michael himself may have played a part in creating them.

Sam asked, "So, can I see them?"

Lazarus knew that Sam would be curious about the swords. Lazarus had only mentioned them once before, when they were in California. He brought them out for use if he thought he was going to run into an actual demon, rarely to deal with the possessed. He only had them in New York because his Intel indicated the

possibility that Lilith was present during the sacrifice. Since this mission already had one demon in the wings, he felt it appropriate to bring them. Now that there were two of them in the mix, he was happy to have the swords.

“Sure, if you want to.” Lazarus walked over to the bed, and pulled up a zippered, canvass bag that looked like it had traveled all over the world. It was threadbare, made of heavy canvass. He put it on the bed, and the unmistakable sound of metal on metal was heard. He unzipped the canvas bag, and folded the top flap back. Lying on one side of the canvas bag were the twin swords, with blades about eighteen inches long. The handles were worn leather, though the quillons and the pommels were brilliantly polished. The quillons were different than the regular guards you found on swords. The half-moon guards angled forward, then bent sharply to parallel the blade of the weapon. Lazarus pulled the swords from the sheaths and laid them on the bed.

Sam looked at the blades, and immediately knew they were designed to be sword breakers. The swords were two of the most beautiful works of art that he had ever seen. The blade began as a rectangle of solid metal that ran for three inches. The rectangle was as wide as the blade, and a quarter of an inch deep. The quilon ran parallel to this part. This part of the blade was the sword breaker. At the terminus of the quilon, the rectangular shaft changed to a regular blade, sharpened on both edges. It looked like a Roman gladius, though it was a bit narrower, and the point was rounder. There was a deep blood groove in the middle of the blade.

It was the inlay that took the breath away, though. Scenes from the bible were inlaid in precious metals. Gold in three different colors, platinum, and other precious metals were interwoven to create beautiful illustrations. From where he was, Sam could see the scene with the angels driving Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. The two swords rested in kydex molded sheaths. There was some kind of modern gunslinger belt that the sheaths hung from.

Lazarus pulled Faith from the kydex sheath, “I had to make the kydex sheath for them. I was tired of replacing the leather sheathes every three to five years.”

Sam didn’t hear what Lazarus was saying. He was staring at the blade of the sword. Lazarus took the blade, reversed it, and held the handle over his arm, towards Sam. Sam looked up, his eyes wide.

“Go ahead, take it.”

Sam slowly put his hand on the hilt of the sword. He lifted it carefully away from Lazarus. Sam had no doubts that the edge of the sword was razor sharp. The last thing he wanted to do was put Lazarus on the disabled list right before the mission kicked off. Plus, Lazarus might get upset if Sam took an arm off.

Lazarus grinned at the way Sam was holding the sword, “Don’t worry, you won’t break it. Believe me, there were a situations in which I thought I broke that one. I’m glad to say, they seem to be indestructible.”

Sam was still in awe. The weapon should have weighed several pounds, but it was as light as a feather. It was perfectly balanced for his hand, which was amazing, since it had been built for Lazarus.

Sam looked over at Lazarus, “Please don’t tell me that you left these here in the room.”

Lazarus grinned, “Okay, I won’t tell you, but it’ll be a sin of omission, then.”

Sam was floored, “These are irreplaceable. They’re priceless. How can you just leave them in your room?”

Lazarus shrugged, “Nobody ever bothers them. I’m not sure anybody can see them unless I want them to. I was wounded in battle during the middle ages, and I was unconscious. I woke in the hospital, swords missing. They had fallen on the battlefield. I asked everybody about them; nobody had seen them. I was frantic, to say the least.”

“As soon as I was able, I went back to the battlefield. There were scavengers looting the bodies. I watched as women and children stripped corpses of anything of value. I watched as they walked past the twin swords time and time again. One of them had fallen point into the ground, and it was standing straight up over the other. Had the scavengers been able to see them, they would have taken them, as surely as night follows day.”

Sam shook his head in amazement, “Had they only known. These blades are worth tens of thousands of dollars.”

Lazarus nodded, “At that time, we’re talking a few pounds of gold, at least. But since then, I’ve never worried about anybody stealing them.”

Lazarus pulled Mercy out and handed it to Sam. Sam held them both in his hands, then did a few Eskrima Kata movements. Lazarus watched, and he halted Sam’s movement at a few points. He repositioned Sam’s arms and wrists to take advantage of the swords’ edge or point.

Sam stopped, and stared at the swords in wonderment, “These are amazing.” He looked up at Lazarus, “I’m going to feel very bad when I have to return to using my Kershaw camp knives again.”

Lazarus smiled, “Well, the nice thing about the camp knives is, they’re cheap and easily replaced.”

“I am so into weapon envy right now.”

Lazarus held out his hands, indicating that Sam should hand them back to him. Sam held the swords by the pommel so that the blades hung straight down towards the floor. Lazarus grabbed the swords by the handles, and he laid Faith down on the bed so that he could slide Mercy back into the sheath. Then he picked up Faith and slid it back into the sheath as well.

“What time do you want to get started tomorrow?” Sam asked.

“I’m thinking we eat about eight, then we can head over and grab our munitions before we leave town.”

Sam spoke, “Ah, we don’t have to go anywhere to grab the munitions.”

“What do you mean? Aren’t we supposed to pick them up in Amarillo?”

Sam nodded, “Yeah, we are, and we already have.”

Lazarus was puzzled, “What do you mean, we already have?”

“Well, it wasn’t that much, just ten pounds of C4, a hundred feet of det cord, and twenty blasting caps.”

“Yeah, I know. Where’d you pick them up at?”

“Didn’t have to pick them up anywhere. I called my contact, gave him the hotel and room number, and a courier brought them to me.”

“That’s original. What about operational security?”

“Well, my contact didn’t have to go through his organization. So, he sent out some bogus information on the drop, then hired two different couriers to bring me

the boxes. Since they were private couriers, and the boxes didn't cross state lines, he didn't have to declare what was in the box."

"Let me guess, the blasting caps were sent separately from the explosives."

"Yep, that way there wouldn't be any big booms if the blasting caps accidentally went off, just some energetic pops."

Lazarus was amazed by the turn of events. It wasn't how he would have handled everything, but as long as it worked, he was okay with it. Hopefully the bogus information would send out a false trail to throw Mephistopheles and his ATF agents off the scent. It might do the same for any others that were trying to track them as well. They still didn't know who sent the two snipers out to the Poconos. Lazarus had the feeling there was still another party out there that they had to be wary of.

"Well, that solves that problem. Let me wire the next set of cash so that we know where we need to be. When we get the last of the munitions, we can head to Bisbee."

"Bisbee?" Sam asked, "Where's that?"

"Have you ever heard of Tombstone, or Fort Huachuca?"

"Tombstone, yeah, Huachuca, no. You mean like the movies, Wyatt Earp and the OK corral?"

Lazarus nodded, "Exactly like that. Fort Huachuca is in the area as well."

"What, we're going to the OK corral to have a shootout with inter-dimensional demons?"

Lazarus laughed, "How appropriate would that be? No, not that dramatic. Though, it would be pretty cool." Lazarus put emphasis on the 'pretty cool.' "No, we're headed a little bit south of there, to a place called Bisbee. It's the capital of Cochise County, Arizona and has what used to be the largest open pit mine in the world. The Copper Queen is now a very large pit in the earth, and a tourist attraction. That's where we're headed."

"To a large open pit in the earth?"

"Yep."

"I almost wish it was in Tombstone. I'm not sure I like the idea of being down in a pit with a hoard of angry demons."

Lazarus shrugged, "once you've been in one pit with demons, it's all pretty much the same."

Sam laughed, "Well, that's one experience I never hope to experience."

Lazarus replied, "Just keep your head clear when you're around Darcy. Something's in play here, and I'm not sure what it is."

"Yeah, not too sure myself. So, you want me to go down to Darcy's room and give her the low down on pistol etiquette? Just in case?"

Lazarus nodded, "Yeah, you can do that. Watch yourself though. Don't get too involved. Besides, she may not let you leave the room."

"What, you don't trust me? I'm a big boy, I can take care of myself."

"That's what I'm afraid of. I've seen the way you look at Darcy. What's more, I've seen the way she looks at you."

Sam looked up at Lazarus, startled, "What, she's been checking me out?"

“And there you go, thanks for making my point for me. You’re a little too concerned about what Darcy thinks about you. Next thing you know, you’ll be passing her notes in homeroom, asking if she likes you, check yes or no.”

Sam looked embarrassed at being called out for his reaction. Still, he waved off Lazarus’ statement, “Nah, that’s a girl thing. Boys pull the girls pigtails, trying to get attention.”

Lazarus smiled, “Thanks for correcting my misconceptions.”

“No problem. You didn’t get a chance to experience the basics, like homeroom at the William H. Taft elementary school, in Brooklyn, New York.”

Lazarus nodded, “Yeah, I guess my education is sadly lacking in fundamental things like hierarchical interactions between children in the modern world.”

Sam walked over, and clapped his hand down on Lazarus’ shoulders, then pointed a thumb back at his own chest, “Don’t worry Eli. Stick with me. I’ll make sure the gaps in your education are filled with erudite observations of the state of worldly affairs from my youthful edification growing up in Brooklyn.”

Lazarus laughed, and began steering Sam towards the door of the room, “My, what big words you know. Have you been reading the dictionary again? You might want to curtail that activity. You could accidently sprain something, then you’ll be sitting in a chair, staring blankly out a window, and drooling on yourself.”

Sam presented what he thought was a scholarly demeanor, “Hey, I’ll have you know I’ve been taking college classes. I got an A in English Lit. Besides, how do you know that I don’t drool on myself now?”

Lazarus smiled at Sam as he opened the door, “Well, I don’t. But, I guess everybody needs a hobby.”

Sam laughed at that, and stepped out into the lobby, “I’m going to go ahead and give the girls the timeline for tomorrow morning.”

“Okay.”

“And, I’ll try not to be lured down a path of sinful iniquity by Lilith and Darcy when I talk to them tonight.”

“Good luck with that. I’ll give you odds of five to one that Lilith will be dressed in something skimpy.”

“I’m not going to take those odds, because I know you’re probably right.”

“I’m telling you. You’re going to end up taking a cold shower just like I had to.”

Sam had a smirk on his face as he turned and walked towards Lilith’s room. Lazarus shut the door, and walked over to pick up the remote and turn on the TV. An hour later, he got a phone call. It was Sam, “You were wrong.”

“About what?” Lazarus asked.

“About what Lilith was wearing,” Sam answered.

“She wasn’t wearing something skimpy? Lingerie?”

“No, she wasn’t wearing something skimpy. She wasn’t wearing lingerie. In fact, she wasn’t wearing anything at all.”

“What about Darcy?” Lazarus asked.

“Not naked, fully dressed. But let’s just say the invitation was there. I thought Darcy was sexier than Lilith, even with her clothes on, though. I find Darcy very appealing. Tough to leave the room after I showed her the pistol basics.”

“Cold shower?” Lazarus asked.

“Firing up the water as we speak.”

Lazarus laughed, and he heard the click as Sam hung up the phone. The image of Lilith with no clothes on wandered into his head. He stood up, stripped out of his clothes, and walked to the bathroom. The sound of water running could be heard, and then a great gasp as Lazarus stepped into the cold stream. Being a saint was not for the faint hearted.

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Lilith and Darcy were already in the lobby when the elevator door opened. Lazarus stepped out. He walked over to them, “How was everybody’s night? Did you ladies get a good night sleep?”

Lilith smiled and stretched. Darcy’s cheeks turned pink at the display.

Lilith replied, “Well, it would have been much better if I had somebody to share it with.” Her eyes were very aggressive when she looked at Lazarus, “I’m not too sure about your boy Sam. I mean, he pretty much had an open invitation last night, and he didn’t take me up on it.”

A light flared in Darcy’s eyes. Lazarus could see a hint of jealousy there.

“Well, answering your door completely naked may have scared him off,” he replied. The light appeared again, more intense this time. *Yep, she’s jealous*, he thought. That could be a very good thing for him.

“Well, if he’s scared of me, what good is he going to be on our mission?” Lilith asked.

“Don’t worry, I think I *may* be able to rely on him. He and I have a history together. We’ve fought back to back more than once. Demons don’t faze him. I think it’s more of a, ‘I don’t want to put my immortal soul in jeopardy thing,’ not a, ‘OMG, it’s a naked woman, I haven’t seen one of those before,’ things.”

Lilith smirked, “OMG, really?”

Lazarus grinned back, “Got to keep up with the times.”

Darcy looked confused, “What are you two talking about? Demons?”

Lazarus looked at Darcy, then looked at Lilith, “So, when are you going to clue her into your modus operandi?”

Lilith smiled, “When it’s appropriate.”

Darcy looked even more confused. “Modus operandi?”

Sam chose that moment to walk through the front doors of the lobby, “Hey, van’s outside. You ready to go?”

The ladies turned towards Sam, and followed him out. Lazarus made sure the hotel bill was paid, then followed them. He walked over to the van, put his bag into the back, and walked around to the side door. Darcy was up front in the passenger seat. She smiled at him, “I called shotgun.”

Lazarus climbed into the back seat next to Lilith. She leaned over, wrapped both her arms around his, and laid her head against his shoulder, “I’m still tired. I’m going to use you as a pillow today.”

Lazarus’ heartbeat increased dramatically. *I really need a girlfriend*, he thought.

Lazarus caught Sam’s eyes in the rear view mirror, the mirth in Sam’s gaze evident. Lazarus endured it stoically. He fastened his seat belt, and Sam pulled away from the hotel. Two miles down the road, they pulled into a Denny’s. Sam parked, and then followed Lazarus, Lilith, and Darcy into the restaurant.

Lazarus walked behind Lilith and Darcy. The waitress showed them to a booth. Lilith and Darcy sat down on two different sides of the table, and Lazarus slid into the booth next to Lilith, making sure that Sam would be sitting next to Darcy. Sam walked up, and Darcy smiled brightly at him, and patted the seat next to her. She turned her head towards Lilith as Sam sat next to her, and smiled as if she had won some type of competition. They ordered breakfast. Everybody had coffee, except for Darcy, who had chocolate milk.

“So, Darcy, Sam was telling me about a few things that you showed him last night at dinner. He tells me you have a natural talent.”

Darcy glanced shyly at Sam, then nodded, “Yeah, I’m a good study.” She inclined her head towards Lilith, “Lilith says I’m really good at magic, and if I study, I’ll become a master.”

Lilith leaned forward and put both her hands over Darcy’s across the table, “She’s fantastic. She’s learned so much in such a short time.”

Sam leaned into Darcy, with his shoulder, “Why don’t you show Eli what you showed me last night.”

She shyly looked down at the table and shrugged, “I really didn’t do much.”

Lazarus smiled at her, “Please, no false modesty here. You’re among friends. You can show me.”

Darcy looked at Lilith, and Lilith nodded. “Okay, I’ll show you a little bit,” she said.

Darcy took the salt shaker, and shook salt out onto the table. When she had a small pile, she put the salt shaker back down. She held her hand over the salt pile and concentrated. When she was done, there was a figurine of fused salt. It was a very small statute of a running horse. Darcy picked it up, and handed it to Lazarus. He looked at it very closely. It was magnificently detailed, even though it was about the size of a dime.

Darcy poured some pepper out onto the table, concentrated, and blew softly onto the pepper. The pepper rose into the air, twirling until it was a miniature tornado, spinning across the table. It spun to the edge of the table, where it went off the edge, and turned into a spreading cloud of pepper that fell to the floor.

Darcy smiled, triumphant, “I’m really good with elemental magic.”

Lazarus nodded, and smiled. He thought about what he had just witnessed. He turned to Lilith, “Can you do the same thing?”

“No, not exactly that,” Lilith yawned, picked up the pepper shaker, and poured pepper out onto the table. The individual pepper flakes flared into tiny sparks as they were consumed by the fire. The difference between the two was evident to Lazarus. Darcy could create. Lilith could only destroy. Lazarus knew what demonic magic felt like. He felt that perversion deep in his bones when it occurred. It was a perversion that warped the reality of the natural world. He felt it when Lilith did her magic. He didn’t feel that perversion of reality when Darcy did it.

Breakfast arrived, and they ate. Sam and Darcy talked about her studies in college. Darcy asked Sam about his past, and he talked about his time in Iraq and Afghanistan. Lilith looked bored as she ate her scrambled eggs. Lazarus had to ignore the pressure of her foot against his leg as he ate. He hated to admit the thrill that it gave him. He couldn’t wait until this assignment was complete. Things were getting complicated. His mind said no, but his libido said yes.

Soon, breakfast was finished. Lilith pointed out to the aisle. Lazarus got the message, and he and Sam stood up so the ladies could go to the restroom. With the ladies off to the restroom, the men walked to the front to pay the bill.

“What did you think about that, Eli?” Sam asked.

“I’m not sure what to think about it,” Lazarus replied. “Something’s not right with the girl.”

“What do you mean?” Sam had a worried look on his face.

Lazarus paid for the meal. “I don’t mean there’s something wrong with Darcy,” he explained. “I mean there’s something wrong with her power.”

“Yeah, she shouldn’t have it. People don’t just have magic powers. It has to be demonic, right?”

Lazarus shook his head, “That’s not what I mean.” They walked to the door, and waited for the women to come out.

Lazarus tried to explain, “All my life, or, I should say, my new life after I was rescued and resurrected, I’ve been able to feel when things are not what they should be. If it’s not a part of the natural order, it feels wrong to me. The hair on the back of my neck stands up, the hair on my arms stands up. I get a queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. That’s what I feel when Lilith does her magic. It’s what I feel when some possessed human shifts into their demonic form. It’s like a sixth sense to me.”

Sam’s look was apprehensive, “So, what? You don’t think that Darcy’s magic is demonic? If it’s not demonic, what is it?”

“Well, there is a precedent. If it’s not demonic, then it has to be a part of nature. It has to be part of creation. I think that Darcy is a merlin.”

Sam’s look of apprehension turned to one of incredulity, “That’s impossible. She’s a woman, not a guy. And, there’s no way she’s that old.”

Lazarus shook his head, amused by Sam’s reaction. He waved away Sam’s statement, “No, not *the Merlin*, a merlin. Someone who can naturally manipulate the world around them.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. There are people like that in the world?”

Lazarus nodded, “Yeah, but incredibly rare. I’ve met two of them in my life. One was *the Merlin*, who I almost killed before I found out that his magic wasn’t demonic. The other was Rasputin, who was an evil bastard. His powers were not as developed or as powerful as Merlin’s. I’m glad I was able to kill him, finally. That SOB just wouldn’t go down.”

Lazarus continued, “I’ve heard about others. Most of that is just BS, though. I’ve never found another one. Until now.”

Sam tried to assimilate the knowledge that Lazarus had just dropped on him, “What a minute. Are you telling me there was actually a real Merlin? Like, King Arthur’s Merlin?”

“Yeah, there was.”

“What happened to him? What happened to Arthur? Was there really an English King Arthur?”

“Well, there was some poetic license in the story. Arthur was actually Alfred, the Southern King who was able to keep the Vikings at bay. Yes, there was an Excalibur, but it was Merlin’s sword, not Alfred’s. It was one of the Ulfberht swords. That series of twelve swords were created for Alfred and his ten knights

plus Merlin. After the round table fell, the swords were taken by Viking raiders. Merlin, well, I'm not sure what happened to him. Last I heard he was chasing some woman named Nimue."

Sam stood there thinking about what he had just learned. Lazarus smiled at him, "Things aren't quite what they seem, are they? I guess I've just blown your world view away."

Sam shook his head, "No, I'm thinking of something completely different. I'm thinking of Darcy. If her power isn't demonic, what do we do about her?"

Lazarus glanced up at his friend with a very serious expression on his face, "What we do is protect her. If her power isn't demonic, Lilith doesn't have her hooks into Darcy yet. So we have to protect her from Lilith, Lilith's minions, and whatever monstrous powers we're going to run into whenever we get to the Copper Queen Mine."

Sam nodded, "Okay, I guess that's a high priority from now on."

Lazarus nodded, "Plus, one other thing as well. I think that Darcy's the innocent that Uriel was warning me about."

"Warned you about?"

"Yeah, in an indirect way. He told me to always protect the innocent. I'm getting the feeling that Darcy is going to be the only innocent in that pit when we're there."

"Why do you think Lilith's taking her?"

Lazarus' face grew dark, "I think she's taking Darcy to be a sacrifice."

Sam's face grew very grim. The face of death was back. One of the waitresses noticed, and quickly moved away from the pair.

"If that's true, we need to stop it."

"We will. There's something else though. Uriel warned me about someone working with the powers that are trying to breach our universe. Lilith may be that influence. She has something up her sleeve. She's way too casual about everything. Plus, she keeps trying to distract me, to keep me from noticing something. I'm not sure what it is, but she may be the traitor."

Lazarus noticed the death mask, the seriousness on Sam's face. Lazarus reached over and grabbed Sam's arm, "Don't worry. We'll make sure that nothing happens to Darcy."

Sam relaxed, the fierce face disappearing, "Damn right we will."

Lazarus smiled, "I think there may be a little more interest here than just Darcy's health."

Sam was still for a moment, then nodded, "Yeah, I like her. I was really worried. She seems like such a nice lady. I couldn't believe that she was with Lilith. I was a little worried."

"Don't worry anymore."

The ladies showed up and they walked out to the van. Sam hit the unlock button on the fob, and Lazarus took the keys from him. Sam steered Darcy into the back seat by her elbow, and he hopped in beside her. She smiled at his attention to her. Lazarus opened the passenger door for Lilith. Lilith raised an eyebrow, looked at the back seat where Darcy was chatting away with Sam. Sam was listening to Darcy, but he was staring at Lilith. The stare wasn't overtly hostile, but it wasn't friendly, either.

She turned back to Lazarus, and held out her hand. Lazarus held her hand and helped her into her seat. He waited until she buckled in, then he closed the door for her. He walked around to the driver's seat. He hopped in, fired up the engine, and pulled out of the parking spot. He turned and drove towards the Interstate, heading west.

Lilith turned to look at him, "Why are we getting on the Interstate. Aren't we picking up more munitions?"

Lazarus pointed to the back seat with a thumb, "No, not anymore. Sam took care of it for us. We got it via courier last night."

"Efficient," Lilith said.

Sam spoke up, "I thought so."

Lazarus looked into the rearview mirror, "So, Darcy. Did you get what Sam was telling you about gun safety last night? You want to stop somewhere and learn how to shoot?"

Darcy thought about it, "I don't know. I don't think I'm going to be a gun person. But I don't want you to think I'm helpless. I have an idea. Can you pull your pistol out, Lilith?"

Lilith pulled out her pistol out of her purse, finger off the trigger.

Lazarus heard the magazine release button click. The magazine dropped out of Lilith's pistol and fell to the floor with a thud. He was impressed. Lilith was also. She turned around and smiled at Darcy.

"Excellent idea. At least you can disarm someone if needed."

Lazarus nodded, "I agree, that's actually something useful."

Darcy smiled at the praise. Everybody's attention shifted as Sam's phone buzzed. Sam pulled it out and took a look. He smiled, "My contact just sent the last location."

"Where are we going?" Lilith asked.

"We're going to Tucson before we go to Bisbee."

Lazarus thought about it, "Well, It's just a little bit out of the way. Not too far though, only about an hour out. Then we can spend the night in Tucson, and be down to Bisbee before the incursion starts."

They took the Interstate, not the most direct route, and would take longer, about twelve hours. They stopped at Socorro, New Mexico, at a family owned Mexican restaurant. Sam and Darcy led the way. Lazarus walked slower, and Lilith looked back at him as he fell back. She stopped and waited for him to catch up. Once he was even with her, she linked her arm through his.

"A penny for your thoughts, sexy boy."

He shook his head, "I doubt seriously you want to know what I'm thinking, Lilith."

She exaggerated the swing in her hips so that she kept bumping him as she walked, "I bet I can change the direction of your reflection."

He agreed, "I bet you could, Lilith. Unfortunately, I know where that path leads to. Or, I guess I should say fortunately, so that I don't walk down it again."

She beamed her thousand watt smile at him, "You didn't say that when we first met."

“I didn’t know that you were a succubus then. Evil wasn’t even a definitive concept in my mind at that time. Had I known what you were capable of, I never would have walked down the path that you offered me.”

Her smile grew very smug, “You say that, but you know that you would’ve still desired me, and the power I offered.”

They walked, and he conceded the point, “You’re probably correct. I was a young, stupid man at that time. Plus, what you offered me was something that I never could have attained on my own.”

Her hip kept bumping against his leg, something he was keenly aware of, “I know now, though, that you are the queen of deception. What you offer is a lie. It is a hollow existence that robs people of love and life, and leads to the deepest pits of hell.”

Lilith’s smile turned into a moue of disappointment. She sighed, “Eli, you’re such a killjoy. You turn a bit of harmless flirting into trench warfare.”

He patted her hand, “Lilith, believe me, I appreciate your flirting. I’m a man, after all. You are a stunning woman. You always have been, and you always will be, succubus beside the point.”

Lilith brightened at his complement.

“But there is no way that your flirting’s harmless. Your beauty, your flirting, your sexuality, your harmless fun, is the first indication that the road is tipping down a very slippery slope. You are a very dangerous woman. You are one of the most dangerous enemies I have ever faced, and, I think, will ever face.”

Lilith’s expression grew to one of deep satisfaction. Learning that her sworn enemy held her in high esteem made her glow. She conceded his point, “Well, yes, I guess I understand your reluctance in enjoying my company.”

Lazarus glanced at her, “Yes, I’m very reticent in trusting you at all. But don’t think that means that I’m not enjoying your company.”

She was amused by this revelation, and wrapped her other arm around his and gave him a hug. His heart beat faster as he felt her breasts crush into his arm. She leaned her head against his shoulder as they walked, and sighed, “Eli, you say the most romantic things.”

They approached the door, and Lilith let go of his arm. Sam opened the door and let Darcy in. He held the door and Lazarus leaned forward and took the door from him, allowing Sam to slip in. He continued to hold it for Lilith as she walked past.

“Of course, as much as I enjoy your company, it doesn’t mean that I won’t kill you if you betray us.”

Lilith smiled, and touched him with a light, very intimate motion, “Of course. I expect nothing less.” She leaned in and kissed him on the cheek, “And when this is over, I’m going to hunt you down and kill you.”

He chuckled, “No, you’re going to try. You won’t succeed.”

He motioned for her to continue through the door. They stepped inside, and Sam was talking to the hostess to arrange for a table for four.

Lazarus continued to talk, “You know, I’m going to figure it out.”

“Figure out what, darling.”

He nodded towards Sam and Darcy, “Darcy, of course.”

“What do you mean?”

"I know she's not one of you. She's a merlin. Her powers aren't demonic. She's an innocent."

"Oh, honey, there are no innocents in the world. You should know that by now."

"I don't know what your game is, but I still have some time. I'll figure it out eventually."

Lilith turned and pinched his cheek like he was a little boy, "You're so cute. You have two days. Are you sure you're going to figure it out by then."

Lazarus smiled, "I'm pretty good at this kind of thing. I'll bet you I know it by the time we face the incursion."

Lilith thought about it, "maybe. So, what's the wager?"

"I'm thinking a steak dinner at Delmonico's."

Lilith shook her head, "If it was the nineteen-fifties, I'd agree with you. It's not the same since the Delmonico family gave it up."

"Okay, then where do you want to eat?"

"Smith and Wollensky, in DC."

Lazarus smiled. He needed to pay some K-street lobbyists a visit anyway. It seemed that fate was going to take him in that direction after Bisbee, "That sounds perfect. We'll call it neutral ground until we finish our dinner. Until," he thought about it, "how about six in the morning after our dinner. Then it's open season on each other again."

"You might want to consider a twenty four hour moratorium on operations after our dinner. I think that I might have the upper hand in DC."

He hesitated, then agreed, "True. If there is a den of iniquity, immorality, and evil, it's definitely DC. I've never known a place with more thieves than that town."

"Hollywood?" Lilith asked.

He shook his head, "Close, very corrupt, but they don't wrap themselves in the flag when they steal your money."

Their table was ready, so they followed the hostess. They stepped to the table, sat down across from Darcy and Sam. They gave their orders for drinks. When the drinks made it to the table, they gave their orders for the entrée.

Darcy looked at Lazarus and Lilith, "You two look like you're fast friends now."

Lazarus stopped eating the corn chip, and used one of the points to make his point, "That, young lady, would be a misunderstanding on your part."

Lilith nodded, "Yes, we're just making an agreement on how long before we start hunting each other again."

"Hunt each other? Why?"

Lazarus looked at Lilith, who shrugged, indicating she didn't mind if he spilled the beans. "I thought you'd try to tell her sometime anyway. Might as well be now."

He pointed at himself, "Saint." He pointed at Lilith, "Demon Succubus." He continued his explanation, "You understand that Lilith and I are sworn enemies. We've been trying to kill each other for, oh," he paused, and counted on the fingers on one hand, his eyes looking towards the ceiling as he thought, "what, about eighteen hundred years now?"

Lilith thought about it, and nodded as she bit into a corn chip and salsa. She chewed, swallowed, and then spoke, "Yes, I think that's about the time you decided to go into your current line of work."

Darcy looked at them like they had grown horns on their heads, “eighteen hundred years?”

Lazarus looked at Lilith, “Have you talked to her about anything?”

“Not really, no.”

He looked back at Darcy, “Darcy, what do you know about the Bible, the Torah, or maybe Kabballah?”

“Not much. My aunt and uncle never attended church, and I’ve never felt a desire to go.”

“Do you know anything about Lazarus, risen from the dead?”

She shook her head, “Not much. Isn’t he the guy that lived to be a thousand years old?”

Lazarus corrected her, “No. That was Methuselah. A different guy completely. Lazarus was raised from the dead.”

Darcy shrugged her shoulders.

“What about Lilith? Have you ever heard about her?”

Darcy pointed across the table at Lilith, “You mean, her? I met her at the college. She was thinking about getting a degree in nursing. That’s how we met. Or are you talking about Lilith Fair?”

Lazarus smiled, “Well, the original Lilith is who the fair is named after. Also, Lilith was, according to Jewish tradition, Adam’s first wife, created from the same earth as he was, before Eve was created from Adam’s rib.”

“No, I didn’t know that. I thought Eve was the first woman.”

“Well, there is an ancient history of the name Lilitu, which is the Akkadian name for demon. This reference is also made in Sumerian, Assyrian, and Babylonian mythologies as well.

Darcy was bemused by this, “You mean demon, as in evil, the devil, Satan.”

Hands flew up when she mentioned his name. They all tried to shush her. Lazarus spoke, “You might want to forgo mentioning that name again.”

Darcy was incredulous, “What, you’re telling me that you’re afraid of a mythical creature like Satan?”

Once again, the hands flew up to shush her. Sam put his hand on her forearm. When she looked at him, he shook his head, emphasizing that she shouldn’t use the name.

Lazarus nodded, “Yes, I’m very afraid of him. He’s not a mythical creature. He is in fact, very real.”

Darcy rolled her eyes, “Oh, come on. You’re pulling my leg.” She looked over at Sam, “Are you in on this too? What are you guys trying to do? Trying to scare me off before we get to Bisbee?”

Lazarus continued, “Why do you think we’re going to Bisbee, Darcy?”

“Well, Lilith here has taught me about how to harness magic. She told me that there are dangerous, magical creatures that might harm people,” she motioned to Sam, Lazarus, and Lilith, “you three would need my help to contain them.”

Lazarus looked at Lilith, “Wow, you really did sugar coat it, didn’t you?”

Lilith shrugged.

Lazarus continued, “The creatures that we’re going to try and stop are more than magical creatures. From what I’ve been told, they’ve slaughtered millions, if not billions of sentient beings to breach our universe. If they get here, they’ll

slaughter every living thing on the face of the earth, then continue their march of destruction through other realms of reality.”

Darcy watched Lazarus, not sure if he was serious or not. She still had reservations that he was playing some game, trying to scare her. She looked at Lilith. Lilith was dead serious. She looked at Sam. His expression mirrored the other two.

Lazarus explained, “What you have, Darcy, is not magic. Or, more precisely, it’s a natural way in which you control your surroundings. It is more of a psychic ability than it is magic.”

Darcy didn’t believe him, “No, you’re wrong.” She pointed at Lilith, “Lilith showed me how to control the magic, by using symbols, and key phrases.”

Lazarus shook his head, “No, what she’s shown you, is a way to focus your attention, so that you can use your natural abilities. Your God given abilities. No ‘magic’ involved.”

Darcy looked at Eli like he was mentally deficient, “Eli, there is no devil, and no god. And, if she existed, she wouldn’t subscribe to your outdated world view.”

Lazarus sighed, “Look, I’m not here to discuss semantics. I’m trying to impress upon you that there’s more going on here than you may know. This isn’t a walk in the park. There are dangerous, evil adversaries that we’re going to face in the next few days.”

Darcy rolled her eyes, “Eli, there’s no such thing as evil. That’s just society trying to label a person who doesn’t fit into societal norms.”

Lilith tried to subdue the laugh that came out, and just managed to turn it into a cough. Lazarus reached over and touched Darcy’s forearm, gently, with his hand, the intimacy getting her attention, “Darcy, whatever else you need to take away from this conversation, the one thing you need to remember is this. Evil is very real, and there are evil people that want to hurt you.”

“Why are we talking about this? What is this about? Are you afraid I can’t handle myself in Bisbee?”

Lazarus sighed, “No, Darcy, that’s not it. I just want you to be prepared for any eventuality.”

Lilith put her hand on Lazarus’ forearm, forestalling anything else he was about to add, “Eli, she’s a humanist. She doesn’t understand anything you’re talking about,” she turned to Darcy, “do you, honey.”

Darcy was miffed by Lilith’s patronizing tone, “Of course I understand. I just don’t believe that’s how the world works. I believe everything comes from nature, not some mythological ‘God.’”

Lazarus continued, and tried to explain further, “Darcy, I don’t think you get it. My real name is Eleazar. I was the Bishop of Bethany, on the island of Cyprus for many years.”

Darcy laughed, “Are you trying to tell me you’re a religious man? Forgive me if I don’t believe you. Not with all the weapons you carry.”

Darcy grew quiet. What he was trying to tell her, suddenly sank in. Darcy shook her head, rejecting it, “That’s impossible. That means that you’re about, what, two thousand years old.” She looked at Lilith, “Next, you’re going to try and tell me that she’s the original Lilith.”

Lazarus, Sam, and Lilith didn't say a word, their silence deafening. They sat there, watching Darcy. Darcy laughed again, the look on her face incredulous, "Are you trying to tell me that she's a demon that's been around since Adam was alive?"

Lazarus shrugged. Lilith picked up another biscuit and began buttering it. Darcy looked at Sam. Sam nodded.

Darcy looked at all three of them as if they had lost their minds, "You can't all be crazy."

Lazarus spoke, "Darcy, you can manipulate the physical reality that surrounds you. Are you going to tell me that we're mad because we're telling you about demons and demonic magic?"

The table grew quiet as Darcy tried to digest what she had just been told. She turned to Lilith, "So what, are you going to go Oogy Boogy, on me now and turn into a demon and try to eat me?"

"Honey, that's so not what I do. I'm not an Oogy Boogy kind of girl. My line of work is more like sales."

Lazarus continued, "Darcy, you have a major misunderstanding of what demons are, and what they do." He turned to Lilith, "This lovely lady you see before you is perfect for what she does. She's lovely, erudite, sexy, and appealing to ninety-nine percent of the human race."

Lilith spoke, apparently touched by what Lazarus had just said, "Awww, that's the sweetest thing I think you've ever said to me, Eli."

Sam rolled his eyes. Lazarus continued, "Hers is not a job of killing and destroying. Instead, she tempts, she cajoles, and she flatters. The people that she tempts decide who they're going to be, what they're going to do. If they make the wrong choice, they end up walking a path that they can never turn from."

Darcy remained unconvinced, "Hell is a mythological place. It doesn't exist."

Lazarus looked deep into Darcy's eyes, "Oh, believe me, I know all about hell. I know all about temptation. I've burned in the pit, with demons tormenting me."

Darcy didn't believe him, "And who tempted you? How did you end up in hell?"

Lazarus hooked a thumb at Lilith, "She did. That's why I'm so familiar with how she operates. I know from bitter experience where the path she guides you can lead."

Darcy shook her head, "I can't believe either of you. There's no way you're two thousand years old, and no way she's a demon from the dawn of time."

Lazarus spread his hands in appeal, "Look, Darcy, let me explain demons and temptation a different way. Did you ever know any bad boys when you were younger? Any guys like that you were maybe attracted to?"

Darcy thought for a minute. She looked bashful when she said, "There was a mechanic in the garage where my dad took the car to get it fixed. He had that sexy, tough guy machismo."

Lazarus nodded, "Okay, now imagine that bad boy kept flirting with you, telling you how pretty you are. He tells you things like, 'Your parents don't understand you. Your friends don't understand you. I'm the only one that understands you, and cares about what you think and feel.' What would you think about a guy like that? Especially if he brought you flowers, and paid lots of attention to you, when you were about fifteen or sixteen?"

Darcy thought, “Well, I did have a major crush on the guy. I’d probably be very flattered.”

“And you would appreciate the attention, and probably seek more attention from him as well, wouldn’t you?”

Darcy nodded, “Yeah, probably.”

“How old was this guy?”

“He was probably mid-twenties to early thirties.”

“What would you have done if he had come to your window one night, and managed to get you to talk to him without your parents knowing?”

“I’d probably talk to him.”

“Would you flirt with him?”

“Yeah, probably.”

“If he talked you into a moonlight stroll, would you do it, if your parent’s didn’t find out?”

“Maybe.”

“Okay, imagine that you’re on a moonlight stroll with him, and he kisses you, and you kiss him back.”

Darcy glanced over at Sam, then closed her eyes, “Okay, I’m imagining it.” Lazarus had a pretty good idea that it wasn’t the mechanic she was thinking about.

“Okay, now imagine that you’ve just woken up, and you find yourself in your own bed, your panties are around your ankles, and your new boyfriend is nowhere to be seen. Then, you find out three days later that you have an STD. Plus, you find out you’re pregnant. And when you go to talk to him, you find out that he’s married and has three kids.”

Darcy opened her eyes, and she looked very unhappy, “That’s not where I thought this story was going, at all.”

Lazarus nodded, “Yeah, I know, and that’s where a lot of people find themselves. The law of unintended consequences.” He put his hand on Lilith’s arm again, “That’s what she does. She gives you a choice, and the choice looks very, very good. Then you make your choice and find out what the consequences are. That’s the fundamental essence of what demons do.”

Darcy shrugged, unhappy with his explanation. The food arrived, and they tucked in. It was very good Mexican food. Lazarus was glad they stopped there. Soon they finished, and were back on the road. They decided not to go all the way to Tucson, though. Eight hours of driving was enough. They stopped in Las Cruces. Lazarus was driving, and he pulled into a Holiday Inn Express. As he was checking in, he thought to himself, *I’m not usually a demon hunter, but I did stay at a Holiday Inn Express last night.*

Everybody went to their separate rooms. Lazarus was getting ready to order a movie to watch, when the phone rang. He picked it up and answered. It was Lilith, “Eli, can you come to my room for a minute? I need to talk to you.”

“Yeah, I’ll be right down.”

He pulled on his shirt, and tucked his pistol into his front pocket. He wasn’t wearing shoes, and didn’t feel like putting them back on. Before he left, he gave Sam a call. When Sam answered the phone, Lazarus explained where he was

going, "If you don't see me again, it's probably because I've been kidnapped and killed."

"Oh, I don't think you have to worry about *that*, Eli. Remember, the other night? When I went to her room to tell her about the next day? She wasn't wearing a stitch of clothing when she answered the door."

Eli hung up, and stood there with his head down for a moment, contemplating whatever kind of mischief that Lilith might have in store. He breathed in and out a few times, making sure that he was breathing from his diaphragm, to draw strength before heading down to Lilith's room. He turned, walked to the door, opened it and walked down the hall. He knocked on the door, and waited for her to open it. The observation hole darkened, then he heard the door knob click. The door opened.

Lilith wasn't naked, precisely. She had on a silk robe that dropped to mid-thigh. The robe was diaphanous, and he could see her body as it was framed by the light of the room behind her. She held the robe closed with one hand. She motioned for him to come in, and turned. The front of the robe parted as she turned and dropped her hand. He could see that she was wearing a thong beneath the robe, and nothing else. As he walked in, she turned, and only the light fabric of the robe hid her nipples and the fullness of her breasts. Other than the robe and thong, she was naked from the top of her head down to the toes of her feet. The robe and thong accentuated, instead of hid, her sexuality.

It was tough for him not to stare at her. Her stomach displayed a tautness that invited his kisses. He wanted to run his hands over her body, and pull her close to him. He swallowed hard. Then he looked up into her eyes, and saw satisfaction as she watched him look at her. Anger replaced the lust in his heart.

He was being manipulated, and he didn't like it. Two thousand years, and he was still that naïve boy. She had turned him to greed and lust, kept him from the family that loved him, and made him think his family only cared about the money he gave them. The words that he spoke next came out hard and cold, "What do you want, Lilith?"

The pleasure in her eyes died as she realized that she had overplayed her hand. It had been a long time since anyone was able to turn away from her manipulation. Subtlety was not a trait that she had cultivated in quite a while. Men, and women, did her bidding with very little effort on her part. They were only human after all. Men like Lazarus, and to a lesser degree, Sam, were very rare in her experience. Truth be told, it actually made her desire Lazarus. He was something she couldn't have. Nobody told her no.

It was rare that a human escaped her. It was even rarer that a human escaped the grasp of her boss, even if it was with help. Plus, they had history together, a lot of it. He remembered the old ways, and the old days, just like she did. She couldn't deny the past that she and Lazarus shared together.

She opened her mouth to speak, then stopped, turned, and walked over to the bed to grab the belt for the robe. She turned away from him, closed the robe, and tied the belt around it, all pretense at seduction gone. She turned back to face him, "I wanted to ask you about tomorrow."

"What about it?" Lazarus asked.

“Do you think that Mephistopheles will be there when we go to pick up the munitions?”

Lazarus shrugged, “Maybe, I don’t know. I don’t think he can track us from our end. The IDs and credit cards I’ve been using are all very clean. I paid very good money for them and used a very reliable source.”

“Israeli intelligence, I expect,” she countered.

“Well,” he spread his hands, “I’m not going to tell you who I do business with. Let’s just say that I’ve done business with them before, and I’ve always found them to be very reliable.”

“What if he’s been able to track them?”

“If he was able to track them, I think we would be in jail, or dead.” He stopped, and thought for a moment, “No, I’m more worried about Sam’s contact. I don’t know who it is, but they have major connections.”

“What kind of connections?”

Lazarus shook his head, “I’m not going to conjecture with you, Lilith. Anything I give you could be used against us at a later time.”

“So, when we go in tomorrow, what do you want to do?”

“Well, I’ll go in and scout. While I do that, you need to help Sam safeguard Darcy. I don’t want her exposed. She’s an innocent.”

Lilith waved the last comment off with a gesture of her hand, “She’s not as innocent as you believe. She came to me for magic training. I didn’t offer it to her.”

“Yeah, but how did she know that she could get training from you. I’m sure she didn’t just mention it out of the blue one day. I’m sure that you dropped hints to get her to come to you.”

“Think what you will. I just think you’ve underestimated her.”

“Whatever, Lilith. Right now, on my list, she’s an innocent. I don’t have anything to prove that she’s not. I haven’t seen any signs that she’s cruel or indifferent to the people around her. So, she’s an innocent. And she falls under my protection.”

Lilith acquiesced, and spread her hands, “As you wish. I’ll safeguard her.”

The movement of Lilith’s hands had unexpected consequences. The fabric of the robe tightened, and Lazarus could make out the shape of her breasts. This in turn made him aware of her figure. Once again, his libido betrayed him as his brain wandered among thoughts that were best left alone.

“Why did you bring her, Lilith?”

Lilith walked over to the table in her room, bent over slightly to pick up her coke. As she bent over, the fabric of the robe tightened and lifted up, revealing the curves of her derriere. She turned back and loosened the cap on the bottle. The soft drink hissed as bubbles broke to the surface.

“Honestly, Eli, I’m not sure. While the thought of having a merlin possessed and loose among the public is a thrilling idea, she’s not even close to being groomed for those choices yet.”

Her eyes were twinkling as she said this, making Lazarus think that she was being less than truthful. He played along, “Slipping, Lilith? I thought you’d be able to work faster than that.”

She shrugged, “Maybe. Usually humanists are very easy to turn. Since they don’t believe in ultimate good or evil, it is amazingly simple to get them to make bad choices. Darcy isn’t like that though. She hasn’t been making the choices that

I want her to make. I give her the suggestions, plant the ideas, but it's like she has a guardian angel looking out for her."

Lazarus laughed, "And I bet that drives you crazy. It's not often that humans can resist your temptations."

Lilith leaned back against the table. She had the coke in one hand, and placed her other hand against the table. The fabric tightened across her breasts again. Lazarus could make out the size and shape of her nipples. He wasn't going to sleep very well tonight. He might have to take another cold shower before he went to bed.

"It does. But to answer your question, I don't know, but something spoke to me about Darcy. I think she needs to be there with us. I don't know why."

Lazarus' eyes grew dark, "I think you're lying to me, Lilith. If you're going to use her as a sacrifice, you better think again. Sam and I won't let you harm a hair on that girl's head."

Lilith sighed, which made parts of her wiggle deliciously, "Honest, Eli, I'm not going to betray you in Bisbee. The boss would be very upset with me if I tried to do that. Besides, why would I? I like my job, I like the position that I have. I like the perks I have now. I get a lot of leeway to do the things I do."

Lazarus thought about it, and on the face, her arguments made sense. He hadn't lived as long as he had by taking the word of a demon at face value, though. There was something else at play. He didn't trust her. There was something that she knew that he didn't. Time was running out, and he still hadn't identified the stalking horse that was working against him. He didn't want to be in the Copper Queen mine and still have the unknown third party unidentified. He may have to though.

Mine not to reason why, mine but to do or die, he thought. It was not an enviable position to be in.

He was tired though, so he acquiesced, "It is what it is, I guess. We'll just have to see what happens."

She shook her head, "you don't trust me at all do you?"

A wry smile appeared, "Would you if you were in my position?"

She returned the same smile back at him, "No, I guess I wouldn't."

"Okay, if that's all you wanted, I'm turning in for the night."

She nodded, and he turned to the door.

"You know, Eli, you could stay the night if you wanted to."

He didn't turn around, "I know. But you know that's just not possible."

"We're married already. It's not like you'd be committing a mortal sin."

"That's all in the past, Lilith. There's been a lot of water under the bridge since those days."

"Was it really that bad, Eli?"

He turned his head slightly, "You know it wasn't. It would have been the perfect life, except, you know, your betrayal, my betrayal of my family, my death by your jealous lover, and my subsequent trip into hell. Other than that, it was perfection."

She walked towards him, "I'm lonely, Eli. I don't want to spend the night alone."

He turned back and looked at her, the beautiful, sculpted face, the perfect body, "Sorry, Lilith, I can't help you. If you're lonely, you might want to rethink your profession. Hard not to be lonely when you're surrounded by demons."

He paused, then continued, "You know, you can work for the good guys. The offer is there for everybody."

She paused, thoughtful. Then a look of disdain crossed her face. She turned her back on him, and took a drink from her coke, "I'll think about it."

He knew her pride would never let her embrace such a drastic course of action, "Lilith, one more question."

"Yes?"

"Do you know anything about two shooters sent to kill us in the Poconos?"

She turned so that the light was behind her again, showing off her body through the robe, "Would you believe me if I told you no."

He paused, then said, "Yes."

"Your hesitation indicates otherwise," she took another drink of coke as she contradicted his assertion, "But no, I didn't have anything to do with that."

"Thank you," he turned back to the door, opened it, and stepped out into the corridor. The door swung back, and he heard the lock click as it closed. He walked down the hall, pulled out his key card, and opened his door. He walked in, and shut the door behind him. He pulled his pistol out and placed it on the nightstand. He walked to the phone, picked it up, and called Sam's room.

"I'm back."

"Good, then we don't have to drag the river for your body in the morning."

"I'm touched that you're concerned about my welfare."

"I'm more concerned with not wasting time in the morning."

"Deeply, deeply touched that you value our friendship so highly."

"So, was I right?"

"About her not wearing any clothes?"

"Yeah, that."

"Not exactly, but what she did have on didn't leave much to the imagination."

"I'm surprised. I would've thought that she'd want to tempt you back to the dark side."

"Oh, believe me, she tried. She tried to dredge up ancient history."

"I guess it didn't work." Sam paused, then said, "I wonder why she was naked when I stopped by."

"Well, since you're much younger than I, she probably thought that you would just jump right in to the situation. You young guys are so much easier to influence. Too much testosterone floating around."

"Good thing I'm not the average guy."

"Good thing, indeed. Though I've seen the way you and Darcy look at each other."

"Eh, maybe."

"What, the magic's disappearing?"

"Well, she's a great girl. She's fun, quirky almost."

"Yeah, and her being pretty has nothing to do with the chemistry at all, does it."

"Well, there is that."

"So, what's up?" Lazarus asked.

"Well, she's a super smart girl, but I'm not sure if she's right for me."

"Why not?"

"Different values, I guess."

“Let me guess, the ‘isms aren’t quite your cup of tea. You Marine altar boys are always so conservative.”

“Isms. What the hell is an ‘ism?”

“You know, liberalism, feminism, humanism.”

“Something like that, though I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

“I bet you haven’t, choir boy. Kind of hard to see the forest for the trees when you’re looking at Darcy. Probably hard to think of anything when she’s around.”

Sam changed the subject, “So, what time tomorrow?”

Lazarus thought about it, “It’s not that far of a drive. We can get there in about four, four and half hours. We can get breakfast, then get on the road. After we pick up the last of the munitions, we can get a hotel in Tucson. Easier to get one there than to get one in Tombstone or Bisbee.”

“Okay, how about breakfast at eight o’clock then?” Sam asked.

“Sure, that’ll do.”

“I’ll call Lilith and Darcy, and let them know.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to go and tell them in person.”

“Whoa, no, not tonight. I’m sure that Lilith would be naked again, and Darcy would want to talk until midnight.”

“You know Darcy has a big crush on you.”

“I’m thinkin’ that as well, but I need to avoid that for a few days, until we’re finished. We can see after that. She and I have to talk though, if we go down that road.”

They finished talking, and Sam hung up to call Lilith and Darcy. Lazarus turned on the TV, then thought about the movie. He looked at the clock, and revised his opinion. Just enough time to take a cold shower and go to bed.

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Lazarus met everybody downstairs. They piled in the van, and headed to a truck stop that had a Denny’s. Breakfast went smoothly. Everybody was quiet. Lazarus knew that would change once they had their coffee. Lazarus looked at Sam. Sam was shoveling eggs and hash browns down his throat. Darcy was quiet, and pensive. She kept pushing her breakfast around with her fork, with little going into her mouth. She kept glancing over at Sam when she thought nobody was watching. She definitely had a thing for him. Lilith, however, ate like nothing was going on around her. She was quiet because nobody else was talking.

This was fine with Lazarus. He wasn’t in much of a mood to talk right now. Lilith was beginning to invade his dreams in a way he hadn’t experienced since he and Myra were married. He had a very long night, last night. He dreamed about Myra, during the time after they were married. He dreamed about making love to Myra, her legs around his waist. Then the scene changed, and the woman he was with was Lilith. When he woke up, he was covered in sweat, and the sheets and blanket were on the floor.

Lazarus tried to block the visions of Lilith last night with a very cold shower, but it just wasn’t working anymore. He didn’t know what he would do to get the thoughts of her body out of his head, but he figured that some time on a deserted island might clear it. Or maybe he could do the monk thing for about a hundred

years. Lilith looked at him, and gave him a dazzling smile. He thought about the deserted island some more. Maybe thirty years with no one around to distract him.

They ate, he paid. Afterwards, he walked over to the coffee island, grabbed a large cup and filled it with the extra caffeine blend. He walked over to the counter, and there was an attractive young lady standing behind the counter. She wasn't a beauty in the sense that Darcy, or God forbid, Lilith was. She was attractive because of her youth, and her lack of self-awareness of the effect she had on the people around her.

He put the coffee on the counter. She spoke, "You know, if you get a breakfast sandwich with that, you'll get a dollar discount."

He smiled at her, "Well, that sounds like a great deal, but I just had breakfast at Denny's."

She rolled her eyes, and exaggerated a sigh, "Whatever." She said it with a smile, indicating that she was joking. His smile grew bigger, "You have a lovely day, young lady."

She smiled back, "Thanks, you too."

He picked up his coffee, and began whistling as he walked out of the truck stop to the van. He was whistling as he climbed in, and sat down in the back next to Lilith. Lilith looked at him, "You're in a very good mood."

He nodded, "Yes, I am."

"What happened? You were a gloomy Gus at breakfast."

"Well, you have that effect on me."

She wrapped her arms around his, and leaned her head onto his shoulder, "Silly boy. You couldn't live without me." When Lazarus didn't answer her, she continued, "What happened to put you in a good mood?"

"I've just been reminded, that no matter what happens, life goes on, and it's bigger than me, or you."

Lilith laughed, "Speak for yourself. The world revolves around me."

Lazarus nodded, "I have no doubt that you truly believe that."

Lilith smiled again, "I have empirical evidence that indicates that it's a fundamental truth of the universe."

"And what evidence do you have?"

"Well, the few times I've been killed, the world disappears. When I come back, or, am allowed back, it reappears."

Lazarus nodded, "Ah, the peek-a-boo theory of reality. If I don't see it, it doesn't exist. Next time I hunt you, and you're cornered, feel free to try that approach. If you don't see me, I don't exist. At least, until I've destroyed your corporeal form."

Lilith laughed again, her giggle tinkling as it filled the van.

Darcy turned to look back at them, glancing at Sam as she did so, "I thought you two were enemies? You know, the Good versus Evil thing."

Lazarus took a sip of coffee, noncommittal. Lilith grinned at him, as if they were sharing a secret, then she glanced at Darcy, "We are."

"How can you two be so chummy if you hate each other so?"

Lazarus swallowed his coffee, "I don't hate anybody. That's a destructive emotion. I know there are people that the world is much better off without. Such as sociopaths. I remove them from the world. No hate involved. Plus, we're in tight spaces here, and a smile is the grease that allows society to function."

Lilith shook her head, “I disagree. I think manners are the grease that allows society to function.”

Lazarus spread his hands in a conciliatory manner, “I’ll bow to your expertise, since you’re the one who is desperately trying to destroy polite society. I assume that you’ve studied it diligently to crack its weaknesses.”

“Why, thank you, sir.”

“My pleasure.”

Darcy stared at them, shook her head in dismay, and turned back around look out the window.

Lilith curled into Lazarus, and put her head on his shoulder. It was going to be a very long trip to Tucson.

Chapter 10

Coffee at the 7/11.

They arrived in Tucson around noon. Sam was still in the driver’s seat, and he took the off ramp to get onto Valencia. They drove west on Valencia, past Interstate 19 overpass, until the beige houses turned into industrial buildings and salvage yards. Lazarus pointed out a Seven-Eleven. Sam pulled into the parking lot, and parked the van.

Lilith looked at Lazarus, “Why are you parking here?”

“I want to go take a look at the building before we drive up to it.”

“Reconnaissance?”

“Of course.”

“Expecting someone?”

“Always.”

Sam turned and spoke, “You think Mephistopheles will have his agents here?”

Lazarus concurred, “Last chance for them to mess with us. Plus, the really good stuff is going to be there. If they want to put us away, this is the time to grab us.” He leaned over to Sam and put his hand on Sam’s shoulder, “And, no matter how good your contact and your OPSEC is, it’s kind of hard to keep things like missiles hidden from the government.”

Sam spread his hands, his expression optimistic, “I don’t know, my guy’s pretty good.”

Lazarus smiled at Sam’s confidence, “We already had one site compromised. We still don’t know who that was. If your guy was compromised by another group, odds are pretty good he was already compromised by the ATF. You don’t move that kind of serious hardware without raising some eyebrows.”

“Mephistopheles? You mean, like the cat from the Broadway play?” Darcy was clearly out of her depth on the demon thing. The lack of a classical education in Lazarus’ opinion. A little time in a Catholic high school would have done the trick. Lilith’s leg bumped his. Suddenly, thoughts of Lilith in Catholic school put a distinct image in his mind.

Lazarus shook his head, pressing that image way down, as far as it could possibly go, “No, and that’s Mr. Mephistopheles. The Mephistopheles I’m talking about is the original. He works for the same boss that she,” Lazarus pointed towards Lilith, “works for.”

“Boss?”

“Yeah, you remember our conversation from the other night?”

Darcy took a second, and her expression turned from confusion into one of skepticism. “What, Satan again.”

Sam, Lilith, and Lazarus all began doing their rendition of jazz hands, all talking at the same time.

“Don’t say his name.”

“Ah, bad form, don’t say that name here.”

Even Lilith tried to shush her, “Look, honey, you don’t want to say his name. Among the high profile people here, it invites unwanted attention.”

“I thought you work for him?”

“I do, but I don’t like the attention any more than Eli or Sam does. If the boss gets involved, he can be very unpleasant. While I like a little bondage, my boss gets very enthusiastic about it, to the point where I may, or may not survive the encounter.”

“And you continue to work for him?” Darcy sounded like she was about to recommend a battered women’s shelter to Lilith.

Lazarus spoke, “At this point, she has no choice. After, oh, three to four thousand years of reaving souls for the Great Deceiver, it’s not like she can put together a resume and suddenly find a passion for real estate.”

The skepticism was still apparent on Darcy’s face.

Lazarus slid open the back passenger door of the van, “Anyway, I’m going to go do a sneak and peak, and see what’s there. You guys can stay here, and I’ll be back in a little bit.”

Lazarus got out of the van, and stretched. He was stiff from the ride. He had spent too many days traveling. He tried to shake it off, but it wasn’t going to happen in the few minutes he had. He began walking, hoping that the stiffness would ease. He turned south from Valencia, walking on the side walk. It was a warm day for late October, a typical day for southern Arizona. He wished he could take off his jacket, but that would have been a problem with his pistol. Plus, he liked the protection of the Kevlar and chain mail. He never knew when someone was going to try to stick a knife into him. Or shoot him.

Another few minutes and he was almost at the cache site. Then he saw the dark blue, government sedan sitting in an alley. He slowed down, and stopped. Evidently, they saw him as well. The passenger door swung open, and Agent Johnston stood up. He was dressed in a dark blue suit, and had a cup of coffee from what Lazarus thought might be the same Seven-Eleven that the van was parked at. Lazarus stood there and watched them, wondering what was next. Another agent, one of the ones from Saint Louis, opened the driver’s door, and stood up. They both looked over at Lazarus. Agent Johnston took a drink of his coffee, and shut his door.

He nodded at Lazarus, as if to say, “You can run, but you can’t hide.” Johnston turned and walked towards the cache site, a warehouse. The other agent closed

the sedan door, turned and headed into the warehouse after Johnston. Lazarus turned around and walked back to the Seven-Eleven.

The van doors were open when he got back. Sam was standing next to the van on the passenger side, leaning in to talk to Darcy. Darcy was sitting in the back seat, turned towards Sam, giggling at something he had just said. Lilith was sitting in the front seat, one foot on the pavement, and one leg cocked with her foot on the frame of the door. She was drinking a coke. He walked up, and their faces turned to him.

“Well?” Sam asked.

“I was right. Agent Johnston is there.”

“How do you know?”

“He nodded at me, drank his coffee, and walked inside the warehouse.”

“Do you want to go in and get the rest of the munitions?”

“I think we have to.”

“Why?” Lilith asked.

Lazarus explained, “They know we’re here. If they know about the missiles, they know about the explosives, the weapons and ammunition. We’re going to have to deal with this sometime. I’m thinking that if we go into that warehouse, we can deal with it now, get it over with, and not have to worry about it when we’re facing other dimensional monsters that are trying to suck our faces off.”

“Suck our faces off?” Lilith asked.

“Isn’t that what other dimensional monsters do?”

“Ah, yuck.”

Darcy sat, not saying anything, but she crossed her arms across her chest, the non-verbal communication screaming at Lazarus.

Sam spoke, “yeah boss, not thinking that’s a good description.”

Lazarus shrugged, “Okay, no more H.P. Lovecraft allusions.”

Sam nodded, “Probably a good idea, Eli.”

“So, it’s up to you guys. What do you want to do? They know we’re here. I’m thinking that we go in, because if we don’t, they’re going to follow us. They may even call in the local police to apprehend us. The last thing we need is a nationwide A.P.B on us and our van. That could complicate our situation, and keep us from getting to Bisbee tomorrow.”

Sam looked at Lilith and Darcy. Darcy kept her arms crossed, and shrugged. Lilith sighed, then nodded, “Sure, I guess so.” She took a drink from the coke, “I hate dealing with Mephistopheles. He’s so bitchy. He takes everything personally.”

Lazarus spoke, “Well, I hate dealing with Agent Johnston. He’s too damn serious.”

“Well, he is an ATF agent,” Sam pointed out. “I’m thinking anybody that deals with illegal weapons, explosives, and terrorists probably has a tendency to be pretty serious about it.”

“He might not be so serious about that kind of thing.”

“What do you mean?” Sam asked.

“Well, he’s been turned by Mephistopheles. What kind of trouble would an AFT agent get into that could allow demonic possession?”

Sam thought about it, “Well, other than the regular stuff like murder, sex, and power? I don’t know, maybe corruption of some type?”

Lazarus nodded, "I'm thinking he probably did more than violate a citizen's right to carry a handgun. I don't know what it might be, but there have been a lot of things happening on the terrorism front these days."

"You think he's a dirty ATF agent?"

"Maybe, not that it really matters," he turned to Lilith, "Does it, Lilith?"

She shook her head, "No, not really. If he gets in our way, we deal with him. Then your problem of what kind of corrupt he is, disappears."

"All right, let's mount up, and head over to the warehouse."

Sam walked back over to the driver's seat, and hopped in. Lazarus walked to the back seat. Darcy looked at him, and slid over. Lilith turned in her seat, and closed the passenger door. Lazarus climbed in, and pulled the door shut.

"Everybody ready?" Sam asked.

"How many people can we expect?" Lilith asked.

"They had eight in Saint Louis, so at least that many. Maybe a few more."

Sam started the engine, and they pulled out of the parking lot. It was a very short ride. In five minutes, Sam was pulling up in front of the warehouse door. Nothing happened.

"Honk the horn," Lazarus told him.

Sam honked the horn. Nothing happened for a few minutes. Sam honked again. A side door opened and a face looked out. The door shut, a minute passed, then they heard a motor start, and the door to the warehouse began rumbling up.

"Into the lion's den we go," Lazarus said.

Lilith glanced back, a smile on her face, "He was such a sweet man. I really liked him."

Darcy stared at Lilith, "Really? Now you know Daniel as well?"

"How do you know about Daniel? I thought you didn't know anything about the bible?" Lazarus asked.

"Art appreciation. In college."

"Ah, Rubens."

Sam spoke up, "Well, hopefully, we'll walk out just like Daniel did."

The door rose, and when it was high enough, Sam pulled forward into the warehouse. The door began rumbling down as the van pulled past it. The warehouse was filled with pallets of building supplies, stacked endlessly. In the middle of an open area, they could see six large, green plastic cases with aluminum strips at the juncture of the top and bottom where the two sides met. There were large butter fly clip latches on the edge of the cases, and yellow lettering.

"Damn, we're going to have to move a few things around in the back to get all of that in," Sam said.

Lazarus pondered the possible combinations. Nothing that he thought of could accommodate all the weapons and munitions in the back plus the large cases he saw on the floor of the warehouse. Of course, the fact that Agent Johnston was sitting on one of the cases could complicate loading the missile launchers into the back of the van as well. The other agent from the sedan was standing just to the right of the cases.

Sam drove the van forward, and stopped about ten feet away from Agent Johnston. The van doors opened, and everybody stepped out. Sam stepped away

from the side of the van, to give a wider angle on targets, and for maneuver room. Lilith walked around to the front of the van, and leaned back against it. Lazarus walked forward, opposite the front passenger door. Darcy climbed out behind him, and stayed next to the van.

Lazarus raised a hand, and waved at Agent Johnston, “Long time no see. What’s it been, about five days, now?”

Agent Johnston stood up, “You’ve been a very busy man, Lazarus.” Johnston took a drink of coffee, savoring what was, in his mind, a substantial victory.

“Well, I try to stay busy. I feel that a man who stays busy, stays young at heart.”

“Keeps your mind off of the future?” Johnston asked.

“No, not really. Maybe it’s more about the work that I do.”

“I didn’t know you worked, Lazarus.”

Lazarus smiled, “Well, I don’t really consider it work. It’s more of a calling with me.”

Lilith rolled her eyes, “Please, boys, can we get past the machismo and get on with whatever’s going to happen here?”

Agent Johnston looked at her, “Who are you?”

Lilith smiled. She shifted, just enough to make Johnston check out her considerable assets. The other agent was less circumspect. He was openly staring at Lilith. She giggled at the attention.

“I’m going to have to talk to your boss. I’m amazed that Mephistopheles hasn’t mentioned his competition.”

“Competition? I thought Lazarus was his competition.”

Lilith pushed off from the van and stood straight. She walked over to Agent Johnston, reached out, and straightened his tie, “Yes, his competition. And no, silly, Eli isn’t his competition. Eli’s just trying to kill him. That’s not really competition. I, however, work for the same boss that Mephistopheles does. We’re both in marketing and sales. But,” she leaned forward into him, and looked deeply into his eyes, “I’m so much more fun to work for.”

Johnston leaned back, his composure compromised by Lilith’s directness and physical closeness. Lilith did that to men, making men want her and despise her control over them at the same time.

“Look lady, I don’t have time for this. I’m placing all of you under arrest for smuggling and trading illegal weapons and munitions.”

Lilith smiled a sweet, demure smile, “You and what army, Agent Johnston?”

Johnston was mesmerized. He had trouble taking his eyes off of hers, but he was still able to turn his head slightly, and yell out, “Come on out, guys.”

Four more agents from Saint Louis stepped out from behind their cover. They all had M4 carbines held at the low ready. Lazarus heard something above, and looked up. There were three more agents on catwalks above them, two from Saint Louis, one of them the woman agent. The height gave them good angles to shoot if Lazarus and company gave any indication they were going to put up a fight.

“I see you brought some extra help, Agent Johnston.”

Agent Johnston nodded, “yes, unfortunately, he wasn’t able to help us in Saint Louis. He had another case he was working on. I was able to pull him over when I told my bosses about this sting.”

“Well, technically, it’s only a sting if we didn’t know you were going to be here. And, if you were undercover and we were giving you money for the weapons. We’ve known for a while that you were going to intercept one of our shipments. Since you didn’t hit us on the last one, I kind of figured that you would probably hit us on this one. So, not really a sting.”

“Technically true,” Agent Johnston admitted. Lilith was standing close enough to make Agent Johnston nervous, “but it has no bearing on what’s going to happen next.”

Lilith leaned forward, “I suppose you mean the part where you shoot us all for trying to resist arrest.”

Lazarus heard Darcy gasp behind him, as she realized the gravity of the situation.

“Now Darcy,” Lazarus said.

A split second later, multiple clicks were heard as magazines disengaged from their firearms. The M4 magazines from the ground crew hit first, followed closely by the three magazines from the crew on the catwalks. The three magazines hit the ground with such force that they split and bullets cascaded and rolled across the floor. The magazines from Agent Johnston’s Glock and the other agent hit the floor with heavy clicks.

Lazarus heard a heavy clatter on the floor next to him, and looked down to see the magazine from his Springfield XD on the ground. From the reactions of Sam and Lilith, they had just experienced the same thing.

“Well, that was unexpected,” Lazarus said.

Rage overtook Agent Johnston. He had been fooled once by Lazarus, and he was pissed that it was happening again. The rage took control, and he couldn’t stop what happened next. His countenance grew gaunt, greasy lanks of hair appeared, stretched over a bald head. His skin was wrinkled, and mottled. His hands became skeletal, his fingernails talons. A miasma of rot and fetid flesh grew strong. His teeth cracked and became jagged, almost serrated. His shoes shredded as the claws on his feet ripped through the leather. His posture changed, and his body bent forward, with his arms long enough to touch the floor.

“Damn, ghouls, I hate ghouls,” Lazarus sprang into action. He reached into the van and pulled out Faith and Mercy, “Head’s up, Sam!” He flung Faith over the van. It tumbled through the air, and Sam followed it with his eyes. At the last minute, he reached out a hand, and the hilt of the sword landed in his palm.

“Jesus, Eli!” Sam exclaimed.

The ATF team dropped their humanity like cheap suits. They howled as they charged forward. The ghouls on the crosswalks dropped over the sides, not worried at the impact at the bottom of the forty foot drop.

The first one to find out that Lazarus and his team weren’t going to go quietly was Agent Johnston. Lilith had stepped back as soon as she saw the magazine of her Glock go sliding across the floor. Now she was backed up against the van. Agent Johnston didn’t see the hellfire glimmer in her eyes. His arms flung wide and he leaped forward to maul Lilith. Hellfire erupted, limning her brow. She batted Johnston’s talons aside and fire surrounded her hands as she slammed her fist into his chest. His ribs shattered like toothpicks. Already dead, he howled as

he tried to rend her. Hellfire flared, consuming his body. Ash filled the air as hellfire destroyed him.

Lazarus was dealing with two on his side. He turned, grabbed Darcy, and pushed her into the back seat of the van. He ducked, and talons ripped through the air where his head had been. He whirled on one foot, and Faith arced through the air, cutting the ghoul in half. The sword was preternaturally sharp, and the blade flamed as it intersected the ghoul's body. Fire consumed the corpse. Two more loped across the floor towards Lazarus, joining the one that he was fighting.

On the other side of the van, Sam was engaging two of the ghouls. He was weaving Mercy in an intricate pattern to keep them at bay. He had been caught flat footed as the magazine in his XDM hit the floor. The only thing that saved him was Eli's yell. He looked up just in time to keep the sword from skewering him. Since then, he was on defense to keep the two ghouls from ripping him apart. They tried to slash and rend the giant that was facing them, but the angel forged sword kept them at bay.

Lilith was on the offense. She leaped over the munitions cases and ripped into the other ghoul that was standing next to them. One of the ghoul's arms was shattered as she grabbed and twisted. The possessed howled as the arm turned to pulp. She punched into its spine, and ripped it out through the ghoul's abdomen. The howl crescendoed into a shriek as it died.

Lazarus was dancing a dance of death. He swayed and shifted like a reed in the wind as the three ghouls tried to reach him. His movement ensured that one of the ghouls was always in front of and interfering with the other two. They grew frustrated that they couldn't get to him. Their frustration led to mistakes. One of the ghouls screamed as its hand flew through the air. It flinched from the pain and Lazarus danced forward to drive the sword into the ghoul's chest. It flamed out of existence, and its loss of physical presence didn't register with the other two ghouls as a tactical advantage until Lazarus burst through the ashes to engage one. He cleaved the ghoul's leg through the thigh, and it collapsed onto the floor. He leaped over the flailing body, and stabbed the blade forward into the body of the last ghoul. Cut through the spine, the possessed flared, and the ghoul flashed into ash.

Sam slipped past the raking talons of one of the ghouls, and he surged forward to grab the other by the throat. He picked it up and heaved it. They collided and he stepped forward and rammed Mercy through both their chests. Curlicues of flame ate them from the inside out as they flashed into ash and died.

The last of the ghouls Lazarus had fought was crawling towards him. It was foaming at the mouth as it left a trail of blood on the floor from its severed leg. Lazarus walked forward, kicked it in the head. When it stilled, he cut the head off. With his part in the fighting finished, he noticed the smell of sulfur and ash. He hated that smell.

"Oh my, isn't that dramatic."

Lazarus turned around to see what Lilith was talking about. There was one ghoul left. It posed no danger, though. In fact, it was whimpering, an incongruent sound from the monster. It was suspended four feet in the air. A force field seemed to surround it. The ghoul wasn't enjoying the experience at all.

Lazarus looked over at the van. Darcy was lying back on the back seat. He could see the shock on her face, fear making her pant. There was nothing in her world but that ghoul. Her arms were thrown wide. She was sweating profusely, and she was mumbling. Her legs were pulled in tight, trying to keep away from the monster.

As Lazarus watched, the sphere shrank, and compressed the ghoul's body. Its whimpers grew louder as the force caused its body to transform. Lazarus was dumbfounded at the display. The body morphed, sharp edges rounding. Lazarus listened as bones cracked. The whimpering turned into a moan, then it turned into a scream. The scream stopped suddenly as the body imploded, and red liquid filled the sphere.

Lazarus stepped back, unsure about the sphere, hoping that it didn't suddenly explode. Blood and gore would fly everywhere. He didn't relish the idea of being covered in ghoul's blood. He couldn't even imagine the pressure inside of the dwindling sphere. The sphere continued contracting. It became the size of a large party balloon. Then it was the size of a bowling ball. It shrank to the size of a baseball, then a pea. A blood red pea. Then it disappeared completely.

Lazarus looked into the van. He looked at Darcy's face. She was in shock, confused. She didn't recognize her surroundings. Lazarus moved to the side to avoid her gaze. He didn't want to emulate her last victim. He waved at Sam. Sam saw, and understood. He walked forward, and reaching through the driver's seat window, he put his hand over hers. She started as she felt human contact. She glanced over, and recognized Sam. That seemed to break the trance. She began breathing normally, and looked around. She said something low, that he could barely hear; something that sounded like, "Mommy."

Lazarus walked to the side door, "you okay Darcy?"

Her chest heaved as she blurted out the words, "What the hell was that?"

"That was a possessed."

"You mean, that was a demon?"

"No, that's not a demon," he motioned to her, and Lilith walked forward, "Lilith, your friend and mentor, she's a demon." He pointed at one of the drifting piles of ash, "What you saw was a human, who corrupted his soul for power, was possessed by a lesser demon, and ultimately consumed by hellfire."

She looked at Lilith and Lazarus, finally comprehending what they were telling her. She looked at one, then the other, "So, you're really Lilith, and you're Lazarus, as in Lazarus, raised from the dead?"

Lazarus nodded, "Are you okay now?"

She didn't do anything for a good, long moment. Then she nodded back at him. The bewilderment disappeared from her face and she gave a tentative smile. Lazarus smiled as he realized that Darcy was herself again. Lazarus held out his hand, and she took it as she slid out of the van.

Lilith stepped up, and put her arms around Darcy, "It's okay, honey. If you continue in this line of work, you'll get used to it. Sam did." She looked over at Sam, "didn't you Sam?"

"Oh hell no, I've never gotten used to it. I'm just not as surprised when it happens."

Lilith waved him off, "Don't listen to him. It's not that bad."

Lazarus disagreed, "Oh, I think it's that bad. The smell alone is enough to make me retch."

While Lilith consoled Darcy, Lazarus got Sam's attention and pointed towards the cases, "Let's check that out and make sure that the missiles are actually there."

They walked over to the munition cases. There were six cases, instead of the four that they had ordered. Sam pointed that out, "What the hell, there are too many cases."

Lazarus shook his head, "I don't know. Let's check them."

The nomenclature of the missiles was written in yellow on the outside of the plastic cases. Four of them had AT-4 antitank missile written on them. Two of them had FGM-148 Javelin written on them. Sam whistled low when he saw that on the boxes.

"What is it, Sam?" Lazarus asked.

"Looks like we got a little more than we bargained for. Somehow, we acquired two javelin missiles as well as the AT-4s we asked for."

"What are javelin missiles?"

"They're antitank missiles also, but they're much better than the AT-4s. They have better penetration. Heat seeking, they launch out of the tube to shoot straight up, then they come down on top of the armored vehicle, where the armor's much thinner. Much more likely to get an armor kill from the top than from the side."

"But we didn't order these javelins?"

"No, we just ordered the AT-4s. You didn't ask for javelins, so I didn't order any."

"I didn't even know about javelins."

Sam separated the cases and put them on the ground in a line. He turned the butterfly latches, and opened the boxes. While Sam was busy with the cases, Lazarus thought about it. He didn't like the inclusion of the extra missiles.

"Sam, I hate to tell you this, but I think your contact may not have survived his contact with Agent Johnston."

"Why do you think that, Eli?"

"The javelins. There's no reason for them to be here. We didn't pay for them, and I don't think your contact would throw them in for free. There has to be a reason they're here. I think the javelins may have been in the same stash that the AT-4s were in. If the ATF agents compromised the location where the AT-4s were, then they probably just loaded everything up and brought it here so that they could pile a few more weapons charges against us. Somehow, I don't think that your weapons dealer survived the exchange. At the least, he's locked up somewhere."

"Why do you think he's dead?"

"I don't think Agent Johnston wanted anybody else to get wind of what he was doing here. So the odds are against your weapons dealer surviving to lockup."

Sam sighed, "What a shame. It took me three years to establish trust with that guy. Plus, he had great access to the weapons I wanted. It's going to be a long time before I find somebody else with access like that. The CIA is a hard organization to penetrate."

Lazarus waved his hand, and ash swirled around him, “Not as hard as you think, apparently.” Lazarus motioned towards the missiles, “how do you want to take care of this?”

Sam looked at the cases, and then looked back at the van, “There’s no way that all of this is going to fit in there. We’re going to have to take the other weapons out of the cases in the van. We have to take the missiles out of the cases, and put them on the floor in the back. We’ll leave all of the cases here.”

Lazarus concurred and began pulling a missile out of the foam padding that lined the cases. He walked past Darcy and Lilith to the back. He sat the missile down on the ground, and opened up the back of the van. He began moving ammunition crates to one side, pulling weapons out of pelican cases, and lined up the M60 machineguns. Next, he picked up the tube that contained the missile, and laid it in the back, next to the M60s. He walked the rifles and pistols forward, and placed them under the back bench seat. Sam brought another missile back, and placed it on the floor, next to the first. Lazarus walked back to grab another missile. Darcy was already at the cases, pulling an AT-4 out to take to the back of the van. Lilith was sitting in the front seat, drinking her coke. Lazarus looked at Lilith, and spread his hands in question.

Lilith looked at him, “What?”

Lazarus shook his head, and kept walking. *Beautiful, sexy, evil, and lazy*, he thought.

They quickly transferred the remaining missiles, then pulled the electronic sight components from the cases, and put them into the van, next to the missiles. They took the tarps and blankets, and spread them out over the weapons and munitions. Sam, Darcy, and Lilith climbed into the van, and Lazarus went over to the controls for the warehouse door. He pressed the green button, and the door began rolling up, sunlight cascading through, lighting up the warehouse with an intensity that made Lazarus blink.

He looked outside to see if there was anyone out there that had an interest in the warehouse or them. He didn’t see anyone or anything. He waved to Sam, and Sam backed the van out of the door. Once the van was out, Lazarus walked out the door, over to the van, and sat down in the back seat next to Darcy. He slid the van door shut. He motioned for Sam to go ahead and drive. They pulled away from the warehouse.

“Where do you want to go?”

Lazarus thought, then spoke, “I think it would be better if we go ahead and head on to Benson. We’ll be closer to the target, and there will be less of a chance of interference. It’s only about thirty, forty minutes from Benson down to the Copper Queen. Plus, we can stop at the Bisbee Coffee Company in the morning and get some good coffee, before we drive in.”

He turned to Darcy, “Is that okay with you?”

She nodded. He turned to Lilith, “Good for you?”

She waved a hand in the air, “Sure, whatever.”

They turned onto Valencia, drove to Interstate 19, then turned east onto Interstate 10. Another thirty minutes, and they were pulling off Interstate 10, and into the parking lot of the Benson Best Western.

They climbed out of the van. Sam locked the door, and they headed into the lobby of the hotel. All four filled out registry cards and Lazarus paid for the rooms.

“Hey, Eli, you want to get something to eat?”

Lazarus shook his head, “No, not right now. I’m not too hungry. I might get some Wendy’s later on. Or maybe go to the Denny’s and get takeout.”

“What time do you want to head out in the morning?”

“Well, we don’t have to be anywhere early. We have to be at the Copper Queen in the afternoon. If you guys want to go to Denny’s in the morning, we can drive down after that.”

“I thought we were going to eat at the coffee place?” Lilith said.

“No, we’ll just get coffee there. The only thing they have is baked goods. I want a good breakfast in the morning.”

“You want to eat something greasy before you go into a fight?” Darcy asked.

Lazarus shrugged, “Not necessarily greasy. But yeah, I want a good meal. You never know when it’s going to be your last.”

Darcy looked uneasy at his explanation. The fight with the ghouls had taken the luster off of their mission. Magic wasn’t as glamorous to Darcy, anymore.

They split up after that. Lazarus went to his room, turned on the TV, and undressed for a long, hot shower. The stench of brimstone and rot faded from his memory. He walked out of the shower, and toweled off. He wrapped a towel around his waist, then shaved. The foam and the razor blade felt good against his face as he scraped the whiskers off. He took a towel and wiped away the last of the foam. He pulled out scissors and trimmed the mustache and beard. He brushed his teeth.

It was mundane, it was boring, but it felt very good to do something this ordinary. The movement of the razor against his skin, the movement of the brush across his teeth, was rhythmic and lulled him into a sense of normality, of banality. The phone rang, jarring him back to reality.

He crossed over to the phone and picked it up, “Hello?”

“Hi, Eli,” Darcy paused, “can I talk to you?” she asked.

“Sure, where do you want to talk?”

“I haven’t eaten yet. You want to go down to Denny’s?”

Lazarus really didn’t want to leave his room, but he knew that Darcy was pretty unsettled by the events of the day, “Yeah, I can meet you downstairs in the lobby. Can you give me about twenty minutes? I need to get dressed.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“No interruption at all. I just wanted to get rid of the sulfur smell. Just give me twenty minutes and I’ll be there.”

“Okay, I’ll meet you.”

He dropped the towel and put clothes on. He pulled on his jacket. It was warm in the desert during the day, but the night could cool off pretty quick. Plus, he had his pistol on. He walked out of the room and walked down the stairs.

Darcy was in the lobby waiting for him. She was as lovely as ever. The difference between her beauty and Lilith’s was striking. With her it was as natural as the world around them. There was no artifice, no makeup. A smile lit up her face as she saw Lazarus. Lazarus couldn’t help himself, he smiled in response. He walked over to her, “how are you tonight, sweetheart?”

Her smile dimpled when he called her sweetheart, "I'm doing okay."

"You ready for dinner?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm sorry interrupted your night, Eli."

He waved off her concerns, "Don't worry about it. I need to get out and get some fresh air anyway. Do you mind if we walk?"

"No, I don't mind. Are we going to Denny's?"

He shook his head, "No, I looked up restaurants on the internet. There's a steak house not too far away."

A look of concern crossed her face, "Do you mind if we do something different? I want something a little simpler."

"Okay, how about Wendy's? I haven't had a frosty in a long time."

Her smile dimpled again. He motioned with his hand that she should walk in front of him. She started, and Lazarus stepped forward to open the door. She stepped through the door, and Lazarus walked out behind her. He was right about the night air, it was cooler. Darcy crossed her arms against the temperature.

They walked for a few minutes in silence, then Lazarus spoke, "Is this about what happened in Tucson?"

She was noncommittal for a few moments, then she nodded.

"Freaked you out, didn't it?" he asked.

Again, a cautious nod.

"You want to talk about it?"

She was pensive, and it was a few seconds before she began talking, "I've never seen anything like that in my life."

"Few people do. When they do, it's often the last thing they see before they die."

She glanced over at him, "Have you seen a lot of that kind of thing?"

"More than you can even imagine."

"How do you deal with something like that?"

"One at a time, until they're all dead."

"No, I mean, mentally. How do you deal with the nightmares?"

He shrugged, "I don't have nightmares."

She stopped, "How can you not have nightmares about things like that?"

"I don't know. I guess I come from a different time, a different place. Things like that don't really affect me. I've been dealing with monsters like that for a very, very long time. I think that if I was the kind of person that it could affect, I wouldn't still be here. One of the possessed would have killed me long ago."

"Do you have someone you talk to about it?"

He shook his head, "No, I just don't talk about it."

They began walking again.

She frowned, "I don't think that's good for you, to bottle it up inside."

He smiled, "I'm not bottling it up inside. For me, it's done when it's done." He brushed his hands together as if brushing away dust.

She shook her head, "How can you kill all those people and not be touched, somehow, by what you've done?"

He spread his hands, "I don't think about it. You have to understand, the possessed have already made their choices. They did something to make their deal with the devil. They cheated, lied, murdered, betrayed. If I hadn't killed them, they would have continued to do so."

“How can you say that about another human being? They had lives, dreams, families.”

“By the time they get to that stage, they aren’t really human anymore. Plus, the people that they’ve killed had lives, dreams, and families as well. The demons eat away at their souls, until all traces of humanity are gone. Believe me when I tell you, I’ve seen the level of depravity that some of these creatures are willing to go to worship their master. The humanity has been stripped away.”

“I just wish it didn’t have to be this way.”

He looked at her, “If it wasn’t like this, how do you think it would be?”

“I just think that, sometimes, with the wars, the hunger, the disease, the violence, it would be better if we just weren’t here.”

“Do you think it would be better?”

“Yes, then there would only be nature.”

“Nature is a cruel mistress, though.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you have any pets?”

She nodded, “Yeah, I have two dogs and a cat at home.”

“Well, think about what would happen to them if we weren’t here. Do you think they would survive long if we didn’t provide for them? Just because we’re not on the planet, doesn’t mean that hunger, disease, and violence would disappear.”

She paused, then shook her head.

“Life is filled with predators and prey. We can choose to be prey, or we can fight the predators. I choose the latter,” Lazarus said.

“How do we do that?”

“Police, Military, first responders, FBI, CIA. All of them are on the front lines, heroes against chaos. But, we must also be ready to defend ourselves, and the people we love. That’s why Sam trains so much. He wants to make sure that he’s ready to fight for the people who can’t fight for themselves. Always remember, when seconds matter, the police are only minutes away. Much better to rely on your own capabilities.”

They arrived at Wendy’s. They walked in, and the cashier asked if they wanted it for the dining room or to go. Darcy spoke and made the decision for both of them, “To go, please.”

They ordered, waited for about five minutes, then the girl behind the counter gave them their food. They walked back with their food and soft drinks in hand.

“You know, Darcy, you don’t have to go with us in the morning.”

She looked over at him, “What do you mean?”

“Look, you’re a sweet woman. I don’t think this is right for you. You can just stay here at the hotel, and we’ll pick you up when we’re done. Or, I can give you money, and you can ride a bus home. No recriminations. When we’re done here, Sam and I will stop back by your house, and we’ll talk to you about your gifts.”

Her smile was gentle, “I’d like that. I’d like to see you both after we leave here.”

He teased her, “I think that you’d rather have a chance to see Sam again after we leave here.”

She blushed, “Well, there is that.”

“Yeah, there is that. Sam’s a great guy.”

“I don’t think he likes me though.”

“Oh, he likes you. What man wouldn’t? You’re smart, lovely, and sweet. He’s just coming from a different background than you. He’s a lot more traditional. He’s a Catholic altar boy who joined the Marines right after 9/11. He’s not really into the feminism, socialism thing.”

She frowned at that, “You think he doesn’t like me because of my education.”

He shook his head, “It’s not your education. You just have to appreciate who he is. Meet him half way is all that I’m saying.”

She took a sip from her soft drink, “I just wish it was easier.”

“Well, Sam’s a handful. But, when you get through the crunchy nougat, you find a soft chewy inside.”

She laughed, “I’d never imagine that. He just looks, so,” she hesitated, “tough.”

“Oh, he is that. He’s one of the toughest guys I’ve ever met, mentally and physically. And I’ve known a lot of tough guys. But you ought to see him with his cat, Mooch.”

“He has a cat? I figured him more as a dog kind of guy.”

“Well, he likes both. But Mooch showed up at his house as a kitten. Mooch was pretty scrawny and sick. Now he’s a fourteen pound cat. Believe me, he loves that cat. Mooch is kind of like therapy for him. Mooch grounds him, gives him something to care about.”

She laughed at the visual of Sam and his fourteen pound cat. They arrived at the main doors of the lobby. Lazarus opened the door for her again, and she stepped inside. They were both on the second floor, so they rode up in the elevator together. Darcy leaned over and kissed Lazarus on the cheek, “Thanks, Eli. I appreciate your help.”

The kiss warmed his cheek. He smiled, “I’m glad our talk helped.”

She nodded, “it did, a lot.”

The doors opened, and they stepped out. Darcy went left, and Lazarus went right.

“Goodnight, Eli. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“You can still sleep in, or take the bus back home.”

She didn’t say anything, she just shook her head, and drank from her soda again. Lazarus watched her walk towards her room, then turned to his. He opened his door, and sat the sack with his food on the bed. He put the soft drink on the nightstand. He sat down on the side of the bed, and kicked off his shoes. He laid back against the pillows, grabbed the remote, turned on a movie, and began eating.

Chapter 11

The Mystery Mobile meets Scooby Doo.

They gathered downstairs around ten-thirty. They walked out to the van, loaded up, and drove to Denny’s. It was closer to lunch, but Lazarus wanted a good breakfast. He was one of those guys that could eat breakfast three times a day. He

had home fries, sausage, and three eggs over easy. He dipped his toast in the egg yolk before he finished the eggs. Sam had a cheeseburger with fries, and chocolate milk. Darcy had a club sandwich and a coke. Lilith decided on a salad.

Lazarus pointed at Lilith's salad, "Really? You're going to fight other dimensional aliens with just a salad in your stomach?"

Lilith smiled, "You don't get a figure like this by eating everything in sight."

Sam spoke, "I thought you got that figure because of your hellish demonic powers."

Lilith pouted, "That's not a nice thing to say."

Darcy piled on, "If I had to stick to salad for four thousand years, I think I'd go insane. I agree with Sam. I think it's the demonic powers keeping you slim."

Lilith sighed, "I'm so unappreciated here."

Lazarus rolled his eyes at the theatrics, "Well, people might be nicer to you if you weren't a minion of the Great Deceiver."

Lilith scowled, "Eli, you know I could wave my hand and every person in here would be happy to rip you apart for being mean to me."

Lazarus conceded, at least partially, "Thanks for making my point for me. Well, they'd all try. I don't think they'd succeed. Not with Sam here."

Darcy looked at Sam and squeezed his arm. He smiled at her.

Lilith was throwing a pity party for herself. She placed her hands flat on the table, "I just thought I might get a pass. After all, we fought Agent Johnston and his associates yesterday. I thought we were a team."

Sam spoke, "Lilith, there's no sympathy here for you."

Lilith looked up at Sam, "Sam, why do you dislike me so much?"

Lazarus grew anxious as he waited for Sam's answer. Sam tensed up, his hands the size of country hams as they balled up into fists. Then he breathed in and out a few times, and his body relaxed, his hands uncurling. He placed them flat.

"Well, Lilith, there's what Eli said. You know, minion of the devil, demonic evil, temptress, succubus. Then there's my brother, Mikey."

Lilith looked confused, "Who? Your brother? I didn't know you had a brother."

Sam leaned back, "Yeah, my little brother. He was five years old when he was taken. His body was never found. Some evil bastard kidnapped him. I know what your covens do to worship you and your master."

Lilith shook her head, "I don't know what you're talking about. What year did that happen in?"

"That was nineteen eighty-seven. I was eight years old."

"Are you sure it was a coven?"

Sam leaned forward, "Your covens steal children, and sacrifice them. Who else would it be?"

Lilith shook her head, "New York wasn't really my area. At least, not then. I was doing Europe. Beelzebub was making inroads in New York though. He moved a lot of heroin and cocaine through the city in the '80s. It was very hard for me to operate in New York with him there."

Sam shook his head, "I don't care what demon it was that controlled the city at that time. You're still a deceiver. You ruin lives. You pedal poison and lies." His face grew grim, scary. The death mask descended over his features, "I'll never be on your team."

Lilith drew back from what she saw in his eyes, her destruction.

Darcy drew back from Sam as well. What she saw there scared her.

Lazarus coughed, and Sam's face changed. The mask receded, and Sam re-emerged. His face grew contrite as he noticed the looks from the three others, "Sorry, I get carried away when I think about Mikey."

Darcy leaned in towards Sam, and put her hand over his, "It's okay. I understand."

They ate in silence after that, the occasional, "Pass the salt," the only words heard.

They finished eating. Lazarus settled the bill, and then followed the others out to the van. Sam and Darcy settled into the back, and Lazarus walked towards the driver's seat. Lilith met him before he got there, "I think I'll drive now."

Lazarus eyed her, then handed over the keys, "Okay, you can drive. Just make sure you stop at the Bisbee Coffee Company."

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They pulled off of State Route 80, onto Tombstone Canyon road, and swung around to the north, to the downtown area of Bisbee. They pulled around behind the building that had the little mall with touristy shops, the 'Bisbee's Table' restaurant, and in the west part of the building, the Bisbee Coffee Company. They parked on the south side of the building. They had only been driving for about thirty minutes, but Lilith stretched as she got out of the van, mainly for the benefit of two men who were walking across the parking lot.

Sam and Darcy climbed out of the back, and Sam asked, "Alright, where's the coffee place?"

Lazarus motioned for them to follow him, and he walked down Commerce Street and turned right at the end of the building. He walked into the door that opened into the coffee shop. Sam stood outside and held open the door for Lilith and Darcy. Darcy stepped inside, looked across the hall, and saw a store that sold copper jewelry, and she went over to look around.

Lilith walked up to the counter and ordered. Lazarus looked at the baked goods to see if there was anything he wanted. When Lilith was finished, he ordered a brownie, and the Miner's blend in a large cup. He looked around, and didn't see what he wanted, so he asked the young woman behind the counter, "Do you have some bags of Miner's blend?"

The girl nodded, "Do you want whole beans or ground?"

He thought about it, and thought about where he might be when he was drinking the coffee, "Let me have eight bags of ground coffee beans."

"That's a lot of coffee, Eli," Sam said.

Lazarus looked back at Sam, "Well, I never know when I'm going to be here, so I like to get coffee when I am."

The girl was ringing up his bill, "You know you can order online, right?"

He shrugged, "I never know where I'm going to be, so it's hard to get it sent to me."

"Well, if you'd stop moving around so much, maybe you could order some. You know you can always have it sent to my house, and if I'm not there, Morgan can send it wherever you are," Sam pointed out.

Lazarus thought about it, then said, "Well, I think my coffee would be playing an eternal game of catch me if you can if I did that. Plus, by the time it got to me, it would be stale."

"Okay, I'm just sayin'."

"I know, and I appreciate it."

Darcy came back and she had bought some copper jewelry. She placed a chain with a copper cross on it around Sam's neck. Sam looked at it and smiled, "Thanks Darcy. I like it."

Darcy's smile dimpled. She gave Lazarus a copper bracelet with a cross and flat, blank part for his name to be engraved on. She turned to Lilith, and gave her a copper bracelet with a feather pendant, "I didn't think you'd want one with a cross on it."

Lilith smiled, "Thank you, Darcy."

Darcy ordered a coffee and had chocolate syrup poured into it, to make it a café mocha.

The walked back out, and got into the van. Lilith was driving again. She didn't have to drive too far from there, only about five minutes, less than a mile. She turned east onto Tombstone Canyon drive, and drove under State Route 80. She pulled into the Copper Queen Mine tours parking lot.

As they drove towards the office, Lazarus noticed a burly, tattooed man in a leather jacket, dark t-shirt, blue jeans, and heavy boots sitting on a Harley motorcycle. He had long, blond hair, and an impressive long, red beard. There was a Nazi Swastika tattooed on the side of his bicep. Lazarus had an immediate disliking of the man. Beyond the Nazi insignia, Lazarus could feel the wrongness about him. He could feel the demon taint.

"One of yours?" Lazarus asked.

Lilith nodded, "Yeah, I have converts in the Disciples. Plus, they really like to party." She pulled over to the man on the motorcycle. "Hey, Bull, where's Skull?"

Lazarus muttered, "Apropos name for the motorcycle gang."

The man forked his thumb over his shoulder at the entrance to the pit road, "He's already down in the mine, waiting for you, darlin'."

She batted her eyes at him, then threw him a kiss, "We need to get together and have another party."

Bull smiled a big grin, "I'm up for it whenever you are." He looked into the van, and didn't like what he saw, "Friends of yours?"

She nodded, "They're here to help us with this problem."

"I don't know, hon. They look like the problem to me. Especially that big one in back. You can bring his girlfriend to the next party, though." Bull blew a kiss towards Darcy.

Sam looked like he could throttle the guy. Darcy leaned into Sam, the idea of partying with Bull not setting well with her.

Lilith smiled, "I'm not sure she would survive the night with you boys. I don't think that would sit too well with Sam, either."

The guy cracked his knuckles, "Don't really care what he thinks about it."

The growl rumbling from deep within Sam's chest filled the van. Lazarus could feel the rumble deep in his bones. Darcy looked at Sam in alarm.

Lilith laughed, "Oh, Bull, you're funny. I'll see you down in the mine when you get done up here."

Bull nodded, "I just have to talk to the po-po, and let them know that you don't want anybody in or out for the next few hours, then I'll be down there as well."

Lilith waved, and drove past Bull towards the access road. It went along the rim of the pit to the south side. The van rocked back and forth as Lilith navigated around the holes in the dirt road.

"I don't think we're going to be able to get this van back out of here when this is all over, Eli," Sam said.

Lazarus waved his concern off, "If we can't get it out, I'll buy the church a new one."

The road ran around the lip of the great pit that made the Copper Queen Mine. At one time, it had been the largest open pit mine in the world. Those days were long past, however. The copper had run out, and now it was a tourist destination.

Lilith seemed to be unable to keep the van from hitting the deeper pot holes and ditches. Lazarus banged his head on the window, and Sam hit his head on the roof of the van. Darcy was starting to get queasy

"Ah, can somebody else drive?" Darcy asked. "I'm going to throw up if this continues."

Lazarus looked at Lilith, "How often do you drive?"

She smiled, "Never. I don't have to. There are plenty of people willing to drive me wherever I want to go."

"Then why did you say you were going to drive down here?"

"If I hadn't been driving, you wouldn't have been allowed down here. Bull and the boys would have stopped you."

"You mean, you driving was some kind of safe code?"

"Exactly. A girl can't be too careful."

"I think you could have accomplished the same thing with a word, or a gesture, instead of putting everybody's life in jeopardy."

Lilith pulled up to the road that lead down to the bottom of the huge open mine pit. It was a switchback, and very steep.

"No way I'm going to let you drive down that damn road. Stop, put it in park."

"I can get us down," she replied.

"Yeah, I know you can, but I prefer to get to the bottom alive. Not everybody in here is an immortal."

"Okay, cry baby, I'll stop."

She stopped, put it in park, and climbed out of the driver's seat, putting her rear dangerously close to Sam's face, "Hey, watch that thing, Lilith." He pushed her away.

Lazarus climbed over and got into the driver's side seat. Lilith wiggled, turned around and winked at Sam and Darcy. Sam grimaced. Lilith slid over to the passenger seat and sat down. Lazarus put on his seat belt, then looked at Lilith.

"What?" she asked.

He tapped his seat belt.

She sighed, "Really? I don't think we're going to survive if I need a seatbelt. Not on this road."

He waited. The van remained in park.

She gave up, "Fine, whatever." She fastened her seat belt.

Lazarus smiled, and put the van in drive. He inched out onto the road, using his brakes liberally. The road was very steep. When he reached the hairpin turns, he slowed down even more.

"You drive like an old woman, Eli."

Sam spoke, "Well, we do have an extraordinary amount of explosives in this van. Even if we survived the drop off the side, I don't think we would survive the explosion at the bottom." He looked down at the bottom of the open pit, "And I don't think your motorcycle gang down there would appreciate it either."

Lilith craned her neck to try and get a look at who was waiting for her at the bottom, but she was on the wrong side of the van. She had to wait for the next turn to see who was down there, "Good, it looks like they have their entire chapter here."

Lazarus spoke, "Let me guess, a pack of lycanthropes?"

"Yeah, how did you know?"

"Well, you have a pack of bikers. I don't think that vampires would be their style. Plus, it's daylight. You already have an alpha male hierarchy in a biker gang. One just seems to fit the other." Lazarus thought for a second, looked at Lilith, then looked at Sam and Darcy in the back seat and started laughing.

"What are you laughing at, Eli?" Sam asked.

"Well, we're in a van, we have a red head and a brunette, and now I'm trying to figure out who's Fred and who's Shaggy." He hooked a thumb towards the big hole in the ground, "I guess we're taking the mystery mobile down to meet Scooby Doo."

Lilith snickered. Sam rolled his eyes. Darcy didn't know what he was talking about.

Lazarus was able to avoid more of the problematic landscape driving down the road, but even he wasn't able to keep the van from bouncing around. Darcy was about to get sick in the back of the van. Sam tried to keep her calm by massaging the back of her neck. It seemed to help, or at least keep her mind off of the swaying of the van. She leaned her head against his shoulder and closed her eyes, sighing. Sam ran his hand up and down her back, trying to help her settle. He put his chin on top of her head. She nuzzled in.

Lazarus made the last hairpin turn, and a few thousand feet later, he pulled up alongside the motorcycles of the Disciples. He put the van in park, opened the door, and stepped out. Lilith was a lot more energetic. She burst out of the van and ran over to the alpha of the pack.

"Skull, how are you?"

She melted into Skull's arms. Lazarus felt something, deep in the pit of his stomach. He was alarmed to find himself growling like Sam had been at the top of the mine. Skull grabbed her hair, bent her head back, and kissed her roughly. This guy was even bigger than Bull. His arms were the size of most men's thighs, and he had no neck, just shoulders and a very round, very bald head. He had on the same general outfit, t-shirt, blue jeans, heavy boots, but a leather jacket instead of a vest. He had his swastika tattooed on the side of his head.

Darcy hopped out of the van, accompanied by the whistles of the bikers. Then, Sam unfolded from the back of the van. Some of the bikers choked, and the whistling stopped.

Skull looked at Lazarus, "Man, you drive like a pussy."

Lazarus smiled and waved, "Hi, nice to meet you, too. My name's Lazarus. I'm Jewish, by the way." He pointed at Skull's tattoo in reference.

"I could give less than a damn about you."

Sam walked around the van, "Hi, my name's Sam. I'm an American Indian. I'm one of the mud people that you guys like to talk about. I'm not one of you pure, white guys."

Lazarus smirked. Skull took it as a challenge. He picked up Lilith and sat her down on his motorcycle. He walked over to Sam, smiled, held out his hand, and said, "Well, nice to meet you Sam."

Sam looked down at the offered hand. It was huge, almost as big as Sam's. Sam held his hand out, and grabbed the proffered hand. The bikers around them started laughing, and taking bets on how long it would take Sam to start crying. Sam stood there, feeling the pressure of the grip increase. Skull's smile grew. Evidently he played this game with a lot of people, and hadn't lost in a very long time, if ever.

Seconds passed, and neither man said anything. It was a contest of wills as much as it was about grip strength. Muscle corded on the forearms of both men, veins popping out. Then Lazarus saw the chink in the armor. A bead of sweat ran down Skull's forehead. His smile faltered. His men around him began muttering, sensing that something was wrong. Sam smiled, then said, "Is that all you've got?"

Sam began to bear down. Skull's smile turned into a grimace. His face turned red, then purple. He showed signs of the pain he was experiencing. Lazarus didn't want the Alpha to lose control of the pack, so he spoke, "That's enough, Sam."

Sam held the grip for a few seconds more, then let go. Skull pulled his hand back quickly, probably too quickly. He noticed the look on the faces of his men, and started raging, "What the hell are you looking at? Get the weapons out. Get the weapons loaded. I didn't tell you to stand around." He walked over and slugged one of his men, to get the crowd moving. Aware that it was not a good time to draw attention to themselves, the other members of the biker gang withdrew, began pulling weapons out and loading them.

Skull walked back over to Lilith, and tried to kiss her again, but the mood was gone. She slipped away from his kiss, and walked over to look at the weapons. Lazarus, Sam, and Darcy walked over to see what they had.

Lazarus looked at the array of weapons. There were all sorts of pistols, revolvers and semiautomatics in a multitude of calibers. They had sawed off shotguns. They had M1s, M14s, and AR15s. They didn't have enough discipline to at least use the same style of weapons so that they could share ammunition and magazines.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, Lazarus saw something that intrigued him. He walked over. Three guys were standing there that were obviously prior military. He could tell by the way they held themselves. All three of them had Squad Automatic Weapons, or in military nomenclature, the M249 light machinegun, or SAW. It was a great weapon, perfect for a squad of infantrymen.

Skull wasn't too far behind, "yeah, we brought the firepower. What did you bring?"

Lazarus smiled, "Oh, we didn't bring much, did we Sam?"

Sam smirked. He walked back to the van, opened up the back door, and pulled out one of the M60 special operation machineguns, “Oh, hey, look, we have machineguns too. I think mine’s bigger though, and it shoots a bigger bullet.”

Darcy was standing next to Lazarus, “Are they talking about the machineguns?”

Lazarus grinned, and shook his head, “No, not at all.”

Darcy giggled, “I didn’t think so.”

Skull frowned, upset that he had been upstaged again. The rest of the biker gang watched. They were beginning to realize that one age was ending, and another might be beginning. Skull was beginning to realize it as well. He didn’t like it. He turned and walked to Lazarus, thinking he could intimidate the smaller man, “I’m thinking I ought to just leave you two lying face down in the dust. What do you think about that?”

It was his last attempt to take charge. If Lazarus showed any fear at all, Skull would rally his pack, and Sam and he wouldn’t make it out of the Copper Queen alive. God knows what would happen to Darcy. Fear wasn’t exactly Lazarus’ style anyway. Instead, he held his hand straight up, and then dropped it to point at Skull’s motorcycle.

Skull laughed, “What the hell was that? Is that all you got?”

Three seconds later, a hole ripped through the gas tank, the sound of tearing metal closely followed by the sound of a single gunshot, a .338 Lapua bullet exploding from the muzzle of a Desert Tactical Stealth Recon Scout. The sound of the gunshot echoed around the inside of the mine. With that shot, the motorcycle gang knew who was in charge. It wasn’t Skull.

Third loss of the day for Skull. He lost the respect of his men right at that moment. They would follow his lead for the day, but after this, there was a bull’s eye painted on his back. Skull growled. He pulled a combat knife from inside his jacket and rushed Lazarus. Skull’s days were numbered, but he was going to take someone with him. He charged, and changed at the same time.

The knife slashed, and Lazarus swayed, the movement subtle, just enough for the knife to miss. The knife ripped through the air, but didn’t connect. The muzzle of the human-wolf hybrid bit down where Lazarus’ shoulder should be, but Lazarus shifted again, and the bite didn’t connect. Lazarus knew all the moves that this lycan could throw at him, and knew the counter for every one of them. Two thousand years of muscle memory can’t be fooled. Lazarus countered with a short punch, delivered with his feet firmly planted, the force driving up through his hips, back and shoulders. The lycan was knocked back, ribs shattering beneath the force of the blow.

“Down boy. I don’t think your master wants you off the leash just yet.”

Lilith looked over at the lycan, losing interest, “Yes, Skull, I need them alive. You can stop now.”

Skull was pissed, and didn’t like taking orders from a skirt. Skull stood up, “Who the hell are you to tell me what I can and can’t do?” His left arm was up, to put pressure on the two broken ribs. He winced as he moved, something his pack surely noticed. Hellfire flared to fix the wound.

Lilith turned, and walked over to Skull. Her hand darted forward, re-breaking the ribs. She grabbed them, and twisted, “I’m your master, cur, and don’t you ever forget it.”

Fresh waves of pain made Skull gasp. He fell down to his knees. Lazarus smiled. Skull wasn't having a very good day. Lazarus heard a faint beeping. He pulled out a blue tooth ear piece. The ear piece was talk and listen technology. It was used to talk through the military grade radio that Lazarus had in his coat pocket, "Yeah, what's up?"

On top of the pit, Major Susan Hartman was on the rim opposite the Copper Queen visitor center where Lazarus and his entourage had entered. Eight of the world's finest long range shooters were with her. Five were from the US military, two Force Recon Marines, one Navy SEAL, one from Special Forces, and an Army Ranger. There was a female soldier from the Israeli defense force, and two German Fallschirmjäger. Not all of them were snipers, or even sniper trained, but they all could drive a nail at 1400 yards.

Susan Hartman had done well since that night, long ago, in Afghanistan. She had gone to Officer Candidate School, and become a commissioned officer. She asked for, and got a branch assignment to Intelligence. Now, she was stationed at the home of the Army Intelligence School, Fort Huachuca. Major Hartman had grown from a young, inexperienced girl to a steely eyed dealer of long distance death. She was pretty good in close as well, with either knife or pistol.

She had gotten a call twelve days ago. She had gone to a warehouse in Nogales, Arizona, and claimed nine rifles chambered in .338 Lapua. Soon after that, she went on two weeks of leave, and spent a lot of time at the range getting used to the new weapon. A shooter that did a lot of long range competitions for the Army team, she loved the rifle. It was a marvel to shoot. The others on her team arrived within a week after the phone call.

Lazarus heard a voice in his ear, "Good morning Susan, how are you?"

"Covering your ass, as usual."

"Believe me when I tell you, I am very glad that you're staring at my ass through your 'scope right now."

Major Hartman heard one of the Germans snigger at Lazarus' joke. She spoke again, to give Lazarus a situation report, "I just wanted to give you a head's up. You have six government, black Humvees filled with what looks like government agents headed your way. Oh, and Franz thinks you have a very nice ass."

Lazarus laughed, "Okay, looks like we have company."

"You need us to put anybody down?"

Lazarus chuckled, "My, my, Susan. A little blood thirsty today, are we?"

"Against what you're facing, yes I am. When do I have free reign to take down the bad guys."

"Not just yet. No major problems right now. Just watch our backs, make sure nobody tries to slip something into them. Oh, and if anything demonic looking appears out of thin air, you have my permission to engage. If you see people in a vest like mine, make sure they stay safe."

"Roger, WILCO."

Lilith looked over at Lazarus, "What are you laughing at, Eli?"

Lazarus pointed up towards the rim of the mine. Everybody that wasn't busy looked up. They could see the cloud of dust, but they couldn't see the vehicles yet. He looked over at Lilith, "Looks like your boy Mephistopheles couldn't stay away."

The look in Lilith's eyes spoke volumes. Lazarus didn't envy Mephistopheles when he arrived. He turned and motioned for Sam to go to the back of the van. They walked back, with Darcy tagging along like a lost child. Sam opened the back of the van, and Lazarus took off his leather coat, and threw it into the back. He still had his pistol on his belt.

Sam reached in and pulled out a vest that had additional rifle and pistol magazines in pouches, shotgun shells in loupes, and a knife strapped on it. There were armored plates in the vests as well, on the front and back. Lazarus took the vest, pulled the Velcro apart, and then slipped it over his head. He pulled his shotgun out, and put the carrying strap over his head, securing it so that the shotgun draped down the back of the vest. He grabbed the radio from the jacket and put that into a pouch. He walked around the side of the van, pulled the twins out and strapped them around his waist. He was ready for war.

Sam was doing the same thing. When he was finished putting on the vest, he began setting up the other weapons systems, the M60s and the rocket launchers. When he was done with that, he opened a container that had Lazarus' special hand grenades in it. Lazarus grabbed two, and put them in pouches on the vest designed to hold them.

Lazarus turned to Darcy. She looked completely out of her league. Lazarus really wished the young woman wasn't here. He couldn't do anything about that now, though. He motioned her over. When she walked up, he pulled out a ballistic vest that had nothing strapped to it. It was Darcy's size. It had the SAPI armor plates in it, but there was nothing that could be construed as a weapon on it.

Darcy shook her head, however, "I don't want to wear that."

He patted her on the arm, "Please, just wear it for me. I'll feel better knowing that you have it on and are protected by it. It doesn't have any bullets, or knives, or anything else on it. It will just give you some protection in case something happens. Plus, the shooters on the ridge know that if you're wearing this, you're one of the good guys."

She didn't look convinced. She took the vest from him and her arms dropped as she took the weight. Lazarus saw alarm in her eyes.

"Don't worry, love. Once you have it on, it distributes the weight evenly. It won't feel near as bad as you think."

She hesitated, and Lazarus thought that she would refuse, but then she nodded. He helped her put on the vest. Once it was on, he had her shrug, and jump up and down. Once she was satisfied that she was comfortable, he yelled over to Lilith, "Hey, I have a vest for you as well. And a rifle if you want it."

"Sounds like fun. Do you think it will match my outfit?" she asked.

He looked at the blue jeans, t-shirt, Doc Martins, and leather jacket, "Blue jeans match everything. Plus, it's in Multicam, which is very stylish right now."

She paraded over, and Lazarus helped her put it on, not that he thought she needed help. Lilith held her arms up and wiggled as Lazarus helped to put the vest on. Lazarus lifted the vest over her head, and she arched her back. Her breasts rubbed against his arm as he fit the vest. She used the occasion to brush up against him, and to bend and twist so that all the men around could admire her form. Lazarus couldn't deny that he enjoyed having her close to him. He could

smell her shampoo, the smell of strawberries tickling his nose. His pulse increased dramatically.

A voice sounded in his ear. Major Hartman spoke, "You look like you're enjoying that way too much, Eli. You need to get your head out of the clouds. Look lively, your visitors will be down to you in about ten minutes."

"Roger," Lazarus replied. Lazarus stepped back from the van and looked up. The convoy of government vehicles was navigating the switchbacks. Blue and red police lights strobed as the convoy proceeded. Clouds of dust followed the Humvees, creating a low, brown haze that settled across the terrain. Lazarus wondered what government agency Mephistopheles was going to parade next. Probably FBI or DEA. Lazarus thought that Les was probably out of ATF agents.

Sam had everything laid out, the weapons and the munitions, in the back of the van. He had missiles to one side, and machineguns to the other. He had boxes of munitions open for use, and arranged so that every caliber was available without too much digging. Sam stood back, and admired his handy work. Lazarus looked in, "So, where's the reloads for the shotgun, rifle and pistol?"

Sam pointed out where all the different calibers where. Lazarus noticed that the M60 machineguns had the boxes of ammunition attached to the side of the machinegun, but the bullets hadn't been laid in the tray yet. Lazarus pointed this out.

"Eli, it takes maybe five seconds to lay the first bullet in the tray, and close the lid. I think we'll have plenty of time to get that task accomplished. If we don't, it's all over with anyway."

The black Humvees were on the last stretch of the road. Drama was the word for this display. The black Humvees had FBI in big yellow stencil on the side of the doors. The first Humvee slid to a stop next to the van, and the dust cloud enveloped the crowd. A tall, slim man, who Lazarus assumed was an FBI agent, stepped out and walked to the back of the vehicle. He opened the door, and Mephistopheles stepped out.

The first thing out of the door was Mephistopheles' hand, held in a delicate, gentle, effeminate gesture. The agent took the proffered hand, and helped Mephistopheles step out of the Humvee. Mephistopheles' foot touched the ground, and that seemed to be the signal for everybody else to get out. The other Humvees opened, and four to five agents stepped out of each. They were dressed in black battle dress, with ballistic vests that said, 'FBI,' in bold yellow lettering. They were wearing ballistic helmets.

Mephistopheles patted the FBI agent on the chest with his other hand. The FBI endured the familiarity with stoicism. Mephistopheles let go of the hand, and took a moment to brush his suit, and straighten his tie. The suit was Brooks Brothers, dark navy blue, white shirt and lavender tie. He ran his hands along the side of his head to ensure that no hair was out of place, then he stroked his goatee to make sure it was perfect as well. He turned and walked towards the van. As he walked, he pinched non-existent lint from his suit.

He walked over to Lilith and stopped at arm's length. He placed hand on hip, and spoke.

"Lilith, you need to stop what you're doing right now."

Lilith tilted her head, and looked up towards the sky as if she were contemplating her options. Then she shook her head, and stared intently at him, “No, I don’t think I will. I have a lot to do today.”

Lazarus could tell that Mephistopheles wasn’t used to hearing the word ‘no’. Mephistopheles glared at Lilith, trying for a semblance of authority, but he wasn’t able to pull it off. He could do haughty, vain, or self-absorbed, but his authority glare wasn’t effective at all. He just managed to look bitchy. He jabbed his finger towards her, “Look here!”

Lilith turned on him, “No, you look here, underling!”

It went downhill rapidly from there. Words like bimbo, tramp, slut, whore, plus some more lively curses and descriptions were thrown around, in several languages, modern and ancient. They hurled the insults back and forth like they were throwing knives. Lazarus was beginning to think he was going to see a demonic slap fight next. The two were right up in each other’s faces. Lilith’s biker gang was staring at the FBI, and Mephistopheles’ FBI was staring right back.

Small things could lead to dangerous situations in the heat of the moment. The potential for a free for all between the bikers and FBI was increasing rapidly. If that happened, they would kill each other, the aliens from another dimension be damned. Lazarus didn’t relish the idea of being caught in the crossfire of two different sets of possessed minions.

He put his fingers in his mouth, and whistled. It was a whistle that had been perfected over two thousand years. It was sharp, loud, and lasted a good long time. Everybody put their hands over their ears. Sam thought he was going to have blood gushing out if Lazarus didn’t stop soon.

When Lazarus had everybody’s attention, he said, “Ladies, you two can get back to your cat fight later. But right now, I’m working here. So, get your heads right, or get the hell out of here.”

There was a power surge. Everybody felt it. Dogs in Bisbee started barking. The magical potential was building. The energy in the area was increasing. Dust devils swirled across the ground. Then it stopped, silence fell, and everybody was very still, waiting for what was going to happen next.

A low, calm, voice spoke, sounding distant as the magical forces coalesced. “I’m going to see Mommy and Daddy again,” Darcy said.

Chapter 12

The Double/Triple Cross.

Across the darkling plain, lurid lights danced across the bruised sky, dark magic energizing the air. The world was dead. Nothing was left. The jagged mountains bled on the plains below as throats were cut and lives were sacrificed. The priests cried their prayers to the great destroyer, Ragosh, as they sliced the throats of the few thousands left. The people walked to the priests, all hope driven from them, knowing that only death and damnation awaited them. Struggle was

futile, struggle was pain. Death was the only thing that could ease their misery. Souls destroyed, lives erased, their throats slashed, corpses dropped to tumble down the mountains, lying in pyramids of extinguished potential.

Flutes carved from the leg bones of sacrifices wailed through the air. Drums covered in the flayed skins of Rogosh's victims throbbed in time to the beat of the destroyer's immense powers. Rogosh sat, elephantine bulk driving down the thousands of slaves carrying the immense, hewn throne. Tentacles writhed where head should be, reaching out to grab corpses by the hundreds, stuffing the great gaping maw. The bulk was enormous, four legs setting to the sides of his dark throne. He fed, two great hands at the ends of arms that could hold up mountains crushed corpses into mush. Whorled tattoos splayed across red skin, shunting elder, darker magics in a whirling display. Dark gems shimmered against the skin, punctuating the tattoos, glittering as they sucked in the damned souls. In the middle of them all, one great jewel fluoresced as throats were slit, and the bound, wailing souls perished.

Corpses fed the bulk, souls powered the magic. Soon, the portal would open, and Rogosh would move onto a new world, a new dimension. Life was done here, ground down. There was nothing left, no animals, no plants, no life at all. The destroyer needed new corpses, new souls. He needed a new world. A billion, billion had died to bring him here. The carnage increased his hunger more than satiated it, the paste of the bodies flowing down the immense throat. Now, all of those destroyed souls would power his assault on the new dimension.

A dark figure stood on the peak, looking down at the hellish display below. Dargonth was Rogosh's greatest warrior, destroying countless worlds for his master. He was first through the portal to secure it, established the bridgehead, and then summon his master's army across the dimensions to the new world. There, Rogosh would bring damnation and despair. His arrival would herald a new slaughter.

Dargonth smiled, his sharpened teeth displayed. His was a long, lean muscularity. His dark hide was ink black with dark, dark indigo fur rippling across his skin. His hands held the great blade before him, a blade of power. He whipped it around his head, and heard the howling as it cried for new souls, the sword wailing its frustration as it hungered. The sacrifices on the plain shuddered upon hearing the keening sound over the wailing of the flutes and the drums, and they knew that there were other miseries worse than the one facing them.

Soon, Dargonth would reave new souls for his master. Soon, but not now. Now he needed to hunt, to feed. He looked at the pile of corpses, and knew that this would not satiate him. Instead, he looked at the lines of sacrifices walking to their doom. His eyes were sharp, and he found his prey. He walked down the slope of the mountain, the trembling sacrifices hoping they would not attract his attention. These shattered, damned creatures would not be as much fun, their spirits crushed, devastated. Still, he needed to hunt and chase. He needed terror. Terror would spice the meat perfectly.

He found a family with children. The children weren't too young, and would be able to run for some time. He killed the father, feeding his sword, satiating it for the moment. The mother begged, though she knew there was no hope for the damned. She cried as her children were driven from her and beaten until they ran,

their tears piteous as they were chased away. He gave the children time to run as he ravished their mother, hearing their cries, knowing that their tears would make the meat sweeter. Then he sent her to the priests, and began the chase.

Rogosh watched Dargonth hunt and feed, and a deep laugh boomed from the great bulk, resonating through the bones of the doomed and dying mortals. Rogosh could feel change in the air as the quality of the magic shifted. Reality was starting to change as power surged. Rogosh could feel the other dimension, tasting the diversity of life, knowing the new world would be unlike any other. He could sense the other across the divide of the worlds. The being was easily manipulated. A promise, a diversion, a prevarication, and he was able to lead the child down the path he desired.

Ragosh felt around for the context he needed. He found what he wanted, and shaped his thoughts around it. The gem scintillated as Ragosh initiated the connection. Power surged from Ragosh to his puppet, feeding the Judas Goat.

The final souls were being sacrificed on this side of the portal. He felt power grow as each soul was destroyed, each sacrifice claimed. Now, it would start, all components in place. Dargonth leap onto the throne. The general was miniscule compared to the great bulk, barely as big as a finger. The general had power, though. His strength would be needed as an anchor to the new world. A door opened in front of them, and wind howled as dust, rock and a few damned souls were sucked into the vortex and ripped apart, the path opening. Dargonth stepped through the open portal.

An uneasy feeling hit Ragosh. He felt an ancient enemy behind him. He knew that power, had fought it before. It chased him across numerous worlds, endless dimensions. It was too late though. Before him lay a new world, and once he was in it, the other would have to find a different way through, giving Ragosh a long time to prepare for the combat he knew was coming. That enemy was behind him. Now, he concentrated on the enemy in front of him.

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“Ah, sweet child, what have you done?” Lazarus turned to look at Darcy. A nimbus of spectral light surrounded Darcy as the power increased. Dust devils whirled around her feet. She glowed in the power of the magic that was forming. The intensity of the wind swelled. Dust, sand, and small rocks tumbled away from her. Energy was building.

Sam started to walk towards Darcy, but Lazarus put a hand on Sam’s arm and shook his head. Lazarus moved back, and Sam followed. Lazarus didn’t know what was about to happen, but he wanted to be in a position to fight without being surprised. The biker gang and FBI agents spread out as well. Lilith laughed, and Mephistopheles yelled at Lazarus, “I told you that Lilith was going to betray us all.”

Lazarus heard a voice in his ear as Major Hartman spoke, “Eli, we have a problem. Visibility is none existent. Plus, that wind is going to play hell with any precision shots.”

Lazarus gave a quick, “Roger,” to indicate that he understood what Hartman was telling him. He turned his attention back to the drama before him.

Lilith spoke loudly so that Lazarus could hear over the increasing cacophony, “Oh, no Mephistopheles, I’m not going to betray you, or my master. I’m not going

to betray anybody.” She laughed, “I don’t have to. That’s already been done.” She pointed at Darcy, “Sam’s delusional girlfriend has betrayed the world. But it doesn’t have to end here, Eli.” Lilith pointed at Lazarus, “You can still be the hero. You can save the world. You just have to make a choice.”

Lazarus yelled back, “What are you talking about, Lilith?”

Her smile was mischievous as she explained, “You have three choices, Eli. Unfortunately, none of them are good for you. You can do nothing, and Darcy opens up the portal, and the alien monsters from another dimension come in and destroy this world. You can kill Darcy, and the portal will never open. But, she is an innocent, just like you said.”

Lazarus shielded his face from the flying sand particles, “You said three choices, Lilith. What’s the third choice?”

She pointed at Sam, “She’s going to need a human sacrifice, Eli. You have to take that pawn off of the board before the portal opens. You can kill Sam, and they won’t be able to bring their army here.”

Sam yelled, “What do you want to do, boss man?”

Lazarus suddenly understood. The ghoul crushed in the sphere was the clue. He had a good idea of where Darcy’s parents disappeared to. That kind of thing would really do a number on a child.

“You knew what happened to Darcy’s parents.”

“Of course I did, Eli. I put it together very quickly. Quicker than you ever would, I think. I tried to warn you, but you wouldn’t listen to me.”

A light went on in Lazarus’ head. Lilith knew him very well. She knew that he would never kill an innocent.

Mephistopheles stood to the side, “What do you mean, Lilith? How does this help our master’s cause?”

Lilith yelled, “He has to choose. Darcy can open the portal, but a sacrifice is required. Sam is that sacrifice. Lazarus can kill Sam, and make sure the others can’t cross over, or he can kill Darcy, and the portal will never open. But either way, he’ll damn himself with the murder of an innocent.”

Lazarus looked at Sam, his good friend. He looked at Darcy, a sweet, tortured young woman. Both were innocents. Darcy was delusional, but she was being manipulated, by whatever was on the other side, no doubt. She had no idea that what she was doing would kill everybody on earth. She thought she was bringing her mother and father back from wherever she had sent them. Ultimately, it was Lazarus’ choice to make, though. Uriel’s admonition came back to him.

The power grew. A small pin prick of light appeared in front of Darcy. The point of light was stationary, but, at the same time, it seemed to be rushing towards them.

Sam looked at Eli, “Boss, even Abraham was told to sacrifice his son.”

Lazarus looked at Sam, knowing what was being offered, and appreciated his friend even more because of it, “Yes, but Abraham didn’t have to sacrifice his son in the end. I’m not going to sacrifice you, Sam.”

Sam looked over at Darcy, his heart breaking.

Lazarus put his hand on Sam’s arm, and shook his head, “I’m not going to kill Darcy either.” He looked at Lilith, “I choose neither.”

Lilith smirked, “So, you’ll let the demon horde attack this world?”

Lazarus smiled at her, "If that's the only choice in front of me, yes. I choose to protect the innocent. I'm not going to kill either one."

"You're going to let them destroy the world?"

"No, I'm going to do what I came here to do. I'm going to fight the forces of evil. And, unless your boss wants to share the world with a new demon lord, you'd better help."

Darcy was fully in the thrall of the magic. Lazarus wasn't sure he could get to her anyway. A sphere of light and magic surrounded her. Lightning flashed around the sphere. She was floating above the ground, her arms spread wide, her head back, and eyes closed. Lazarus never had any indication that Darcy had that kind of power, not with the little parlor tricks she had done. There was no way that the power she was wielding came from her. He would have felt it before now.

Lazarus' attention was diverted from Darcy. A great ripping sound boomed through the pit as air pressure evened across dimensions. The portal opened, and a horror stepped forward. A voice sounded in Lazarus' mind, and he assumed, everybody else's in the pit as well.

"I am here, child. Where is the sacrifice?"

Lazarus looked at the fiend. It was physically imposing. Dark blue fur rippled across its lean body. It was taller than Sam, with bestial facial features. It had no clothes, its manhood on display, and it held a sword that was longer than Lazarus was tall.

The winds decreased, and Darcy slowly dropped, until she stood on terra firma. She bowed to the alien being, "Lord Dargonth, I have your offering."

Lilith's yelled at Lazarus, "You may not be willing to kill Sam, but I bet he is."

Darcy's hand closed in a fist, and Lilith's laughed cut off, "What the hell?" Lilith's arms snapped to her side as if a large hand had gripped her around the chest. Darcy turned, and looked at Lilith, pulling her fist into her chest. Lilith's feet cut a furrow into the sand as she struggled against Darcy's power. Understanding blossomed on Lilith's face as she was pulled towards Dargonth.

"Darcy, what are you doing? You can't do this."

Darcy shook her head, "You're a liar, Lilith. You told me I was a witch. You were going to make Eli kill me."

Lilith shook her head, "No, that's not what's happening here, Darcy. He wouldn't have touched you!"

"How's that supposed to make me feel better, Lilith? If he doesn't kill me, then he has to kill Sam. I love Sam."

Sam's mouth dropped open at this pronouncement. It closed quickly as sand flew in. Sam spit the sand out.

Lilith couldn't stop the attack. The intensity of her struggles increased as she was pulled forward. Lilith was in danger, and she began to lose control, fear taking over. Hellfire was in Lilith's eyes. Her red hair stood up on the wind, whipping back and forth. Her eyes smoldered as hellfire emerged. Smoke rose from her body. Lilith grew angry, "Darcy, stop this. He wouldn't hurt Sam either. He's not capable of that. You have to stop, or I have to defend myself."

Darcy laughed, "How are you going to do that, Lilith? I have the power now, not you."

Behind them, Darcy struck out. The bikers were thrown back, some as much as ten feet or more. Bodies impacted into motorcycles. Two of them didn't get back up. Only the FBI were still standing.

Lilith turned to Mephistopheles, "Help me, you ass!"

He sneered and slowly shook his head, "No, I don't think so. I'm enjoying this."

Rage overtook Lilith. Her body burst into hellfire. Eyes smoldered as smoke poured out. Hands pointed, and flame shot out at Darcy. The conflagration hit, but the flames didn't penetrate, sliding across the surface of the sphere.

Lazarus and Sam ran back from the fight. Neither one wanted to be around that kind of power. Bolts of primal energy were being exchanged between the Demon Succubus and her erstwhile apprentice.

Sam looked at Lazarus, "What do we do?"

Lazarus shook his head, "I honestly don't know. If we intercede for Lilith, I have to fight Darcy. But the boss wants me to work with Lilith. Plus, if that creature kills Lilith, his master and demon horde explode onto our world. It's all about the sacrifice. We have to stop that from happening."

He glanced over at the big blue alien with the sharp teeth. Dargonth stood, waiting.

Lazarus made up his mind, "Okay, we'll let Darcy and Lilith duke it out. You and I, we take the big blue guy. We can't let Lilith be taken as sacrifice."

Bands of force and bolts of fire ricocheted through the air. Rocks flew to batter Lilith. Stray fire licked around the edges of the curved shield of power to splash against Darcy. Lazarus ran forward, dodging as best he could through the magic in the air. Magic and hellfire seemed to bend around him. It was clear that he had protection. The necklace that Uriel had touched glowed, and felt warm against his skin. Magic blew by him, but nothing touched him. Sam ran back to the van to grab something that might put the big, blue guy down.

Despite her resistance, Lilith had been pulled within striking distance of the otherworldly creature. The gigantic curved sword swept up through the air, and cut down to slash Lilith, "Your sacrifice is accepted."

The great sword picked up speed as it swept back down. For the first time, Lilith feared death. The sword was her doom. She screamed as she faced her mortality.

Steel rang. The twin swords Faith and Mercy pealed like church bells in bright resonance. The sword that Dargonth held shrieked in agony against the Angel forged swords. The demonic blade was held motionless as the great giant pushed against Lazarus. Lazarus had Faith and Mercy turned so that the quilons bound the blade. Dargonth couldn't push the blade forward, or pull it back. Lazarus tried to apply force and torsion to shatter the demon blade. The hell blade wouldn't break. They were at an impasse. Dargonth focused his tremendous strength. Lazarus' feet slid across the loose dirt against the might of the giant.

Behind them, Mephistopheles watched for weaknesses, both in his allies, and in the alien threat. He weighed strengths against weaknesses, and came to a decision. He made his move, and a bolt of hellfire shot out at Darcy. She caught most of the blast on one of her force shields, but some managed to get through. Darcy flinched against the power of his magic, and the bond that held Lilith loosened.

"Kill her!" Lilith screamed.

That woke all of the possessed. The bikers and the FBI flooded forward. Violence intensified around Darcy as she was swarmed, fighting both demons and their possessed.

Dargonth was too strong for Lazarus. He had to move away from the alien creature, go on the offense. He did this with a quick move to one side, twisting his swords in the other direction. The demon blade shifted and arched down to the ground as Dargonth cut down, trying to drive the blade towards Lazarus. It missed, and Lazarus muttered praise as he danced away. He didn't think he would survive so much as a small cut from the demon blade. Dargonth pulled the blade back. Since Lazarus no longer had to keep it from splitting him or Lilith, he went on the offensive. He was smaller, and hopefully, much faster than the creature before him. His blades moved in an intense, furious pattern. The alien was forced to defend against the twin swords. The fury of the onslaught made Dargonth retreat.

The fight truly began in that instant. Now the skills of the swordsmen were displayed as they tested each other's capabilities. Lazarus had been wrong in his assessment of Dargonth's speed. With such a large creature, and such a large sword, he should be able to dance in and out of the alien's guard, but it just wasn't possible. The pattern of the defense kept his own offense away from the giant blue alien. Plus, he had to work to keep the alien's strikes away from him. Still, Lazarus was able to use his size and speed to prance away from contact. He wove a pattern of steel that kept the creature from moving forward to attack Lilith. It was a stalemate, again.

This stalemate couldn't continue, though. One would tire sooner than the other. Once that happened, mistakes would be made. Lazarus knew that, if the demon blade didn't kill him outright, blood would flow, and it would be just a matter of time before he faltered. Lazarus prayed fervently that it wouldn't be him that drew the first cut.

The thud-thud-thud of the M60 machinegun opened up, and bullets hit the alien. Sam to the rescue. Dargonth held up his hands, trying to use magic to ward off the bullets. His magic flared through the air, creating a shield, but it couldn't stop the blessed bullets. The bullets chewed into Dargonth. Lazarus watched the wounds heal instantly, bullets dropping to the ground. Dargonth changed his stance, and shifted to put Lazarus between him and Sam. Sam stopped firing so that he wouldn't hit Lazarus.

Lazarus used the distraction to his advantage. As Dargonth moved from one position to another, his guard dropped, the distraction of the machinegun fire throwing him off balance. The swords flashed, and the alien cried out, a deep cut across one thigh, and a slash across the abdomen. The cuts from the angel forged swords didn't heal like the wounds from the bullets did.

No such thing as a fair fight, Lazarus thought as he pressed his advantage.

The chaos of the battlefield had changed the positions of the antagonists. The two fights had shifted, and the fight between Darcy, Lilith and Mephistopheles raged behind the alien now. The only way that Lazarus could protect Lilith was to press on and keep the alien busy defending from his attacks. He increased the intensity of his assault.

Dargonth was dying. He knew it. Dargonth never imagined he could fall in battle. He knew that he would not leave this fight alive. The cuts on his thigh and stomach felt like fire, a purifying poison. He had never experienced power that felt like those twin swords before. He was weak from the strike of the bullets as well. He could feel the poison working its way through his body. Incrementally, he felt the weakness start to take him. Failure was something that he could not allow. He had never failed his master, and he wasn't going to do so now. There was only one thing that he could do. He turned his back on the diminutive swordsman in front of him, and shifted his attack.

During the heat of the battle between the two demons and Darcy, positions had shifted. Mephistopheles stared stupidly as the point of the demon blade ripped out of his chest. The blade went in through his back, and came out through his sternum. He screamed as he felt his destruction. His being was shredding, becoming undone. His metaphysical being was being destroyed. His physical, corporeal form had been destroyed before, but his soul, as tarnished and soiled as it was, was immortal. Mephistopheles thought that he couldn't die. It turned out, though, that he was wrong in this belief. He could feel his soul dissolving, turning into something different. He wondered if this pain was what judgment felt like. Then he was gone.

Lazarus ran the creature through, Faith striking where the heart on a human being would be. Mercy cut through the spine, at the small of the back. The alien dropped to its knees. Lazarus pulled the twin blades back, and they met as he cut through Dargonth's neck. The head of the alien landed with a thud, dark purple blood spilling across the sand, the body falling forward. Lazarus knew that he had failed, though. The sound of the M60 sounded again, as Sam pumped rounds into the horrors that surged through the portal. The portal was open, but it didn't widen. The portal stopped expanding with the death of Dargonth, though it did stabilize with the sacrifice of Mephistopheles.

With the death of Dargonth, something happened to Darcy. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head, and she crumpled to the ground. Lilith, in her rage, started forward to kill her.

Lazarus ran forward, "We have more pressing business right now." He pointed towards the portal, Mercy stretched forward.

Lilith spit the words, "Kill them, Kill them all."

She began shooting hellfire towards the opening, slaughtering the alien demons as they slithered, crawled, ran, and pounced through the portal. Behind her, all of the bikers changed as they ran forward. The FBI possessed, seeing Mephistopheles killed, howled, and changing, surged forward. Rifles, pistols, and shotguns sounded, the mass of lead driving into the horde pouring from the opening. The wall of lead stopped the horde in its tracks. The mass of possessed slammed into the horde. Life was short and brutal on that front line as talons, blades, and bullets ripped into the aliens. The alien tide wouldn't stop, though. They fought back with as great a ferocity. The possessed were able to stop the horde, momentarily. They were the cork in the bottle.

Lilith took a stance and shot precise bolts of hellfire into the areas where the possessed were being pressed hardest. Shots rang out as the shooters on the rim

took advantage of the sudden visibility and the press of bodies. Precision was impossible, but there were so many, they couldn't miss. The dead piled up.

Sam, and Lazarus stepped back to watch the carnage, hoping that they wouldn't have to get further involved, but it was beginning to look like a lost cause. More of the possessed were falling, and the waves of the aliens were still pressing forward.

Lazarus looked into the portal. He saw something glowing in the distance. He pointed, and asked Sam, "Do you see it?"

"What, you mean that gigantic figure in the back?"

"Yeah, that thing. See the way the portal pulses?"

"Yeah. Oh yeah, I see what you mean. The big gem, and the colored lines on its body. They pulse with the portal."

"Do you think we can pop a rocket through the portal and hit that damn thing?"

Sam looked carefully, then shook his head, "No, not enough clearance. Plus, it's too far. I think we need to be closer."

Lazarus looked at Sam, then looked at the van. Sam followed his gaze, "Crap."

Lazarus nodded, "Crap indeed. But we need someone to clear the way for us."

They looked at Lilith at the same time. Lazarus ran forward, and clapped his hand on her shoulder. She snarled as she turned on him, hellfire ready to immolate him. He held up his hands in submission, and she saw who it was, and more importantly, recognized him, "I should go ahead and kill you. They'll never know what happened."

Lazarus smiled, "Oh, my guys will know. They'll make sure your boss finds out. I'm pretty sure he's going to be very unhappy when he knows you let the alien demon horde in. Especially when he knows that you could have helped us stop this thing."

"What do you mean?"

Lazarus turned her and pointed out the gigantic creature that was directing the attack. He explained his plan. She stared at him as if he was out of his mind, "You trust me to do that for you?"

Lazarus shook his head, "Oh no, I don't trust you at all. You're coming with us."

She shook her head, "Oh, hell no!"

He pointed into the portal, "If you don't, in about five minutes, you're going to have to deal with that big bastard over here, trying to eat you."

She looked into the portal. She didn't like anything she saw there, but she understood Lazarus' logic. The wave wasn't going to stop, there were way too many of them.

"How do you want to do this?" she asked.

Lazarus pointed at the side door to the van, "You're going to take that side door off," he pointed at the back of the van, "and then you're going to take the back doors off as well."

"How?"

"They're metal, you like to use hellfire. I'm pretty sure you can figure it out from there."

Lilith was a quick study. The side and back doors came off with a liberal, though precise application of hellfire. They piled into the van, with Sam in the driver's seat.

Lazarus pointed at the portal, "Sam, you get up a good running start. Lilith, you clear a path for us."

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I'm going to be in the back of the van, making sure they don't slow us down when we get to the other side."

Sam fired up the van, Lilith sat in the back passenger seat, and Lazarus sat in the back with the weapons. He had a carabineer attached to the back of his ballistic vest.

"Lilith, hook me in." He pointed at two seat belts, one on either side of the van. Lilith ran them both through the carabineer. Lazarus leaned forward, and felt the tension of the seat belts.

He turned and yelled, "Hit it Sam!"

Sam put the van into drive, and made a wide turn to get speed up before he hit the portal head on. Sam was doing fifty miles an hour when they hit the portal. Lilith leaned out of the side door, and hellfire flashed from her hand. One of the possessed was not fast enough to get out of the way, and disappeared in the conflagration. The hellfire hit and ripped through the mass of the invading alien horde.

The horde flinched back from the massive death that took a thousand of their fellows. The van hit the portal right in time with the recoil of the horde. The van screamed as its wheels hit the plain of the alien world. The heavy bulk of the van hit the alien horde, causing even more confusion. The van rocked back and forth as screaming aliens fell beneath the wheels. Other aliens flew through the air as the van hit them and threw them to the side. Lazarus was glad he was hooked in. As it was, he almost launched out of the back of the van when they landed on this side of the portal.

The van didn't delay the horde for too long. The horde's goal was to get through the portal and establish a bridge into the new world. Once the van was out of the way, they flowed back to the portal. Lilith, leaning from the side door of the van kept driving balls of hellfire into them, destroying them by the hundreds. In the back of the van, Lazarus picked up one of the M60s. It took longer than the five seconds that Sam had talked about, but he finally had the belt of bullets in the feed tray, and pulled the charging handle back. He put the weapon on fire, and pulled the trigger. Bullets ripped into the back of the horde, every bullet taking an alien life, sometimes more, the mass of flesh too closely packed for Lazarus to miss. This took some of the pressure off of possessed on the other side of the portal.

The horde wasn't just some mindless mass of flesh, though. Leaders saw the problems the van was causing, and a thousand of the horde turned to chase after them. Lazarus kept pumping rounds into alien bodies, causing major damage, requiring more of the horde to turn to deal with him. As groups surged towards him, he pulled pins from grenades and lobbed them. Aliens went down as the silver and gold particles scythed through the air. He wasn't able to kill as many as Lilith, but he put down a lot of them.

Then fate shined down on them. A lightning bolt flew out of the darkness streaking from one horde member to another, destroying a hundred or more. Lazarus reloaded a fresh belt, and began shooting the M60 again. Belt after belt of

ammunition disappeared as he ran out of bullets and reloaded. He pounded away, yelling, "Get some. Get some." Lightning kept striking against the horde, as Lilith and he continued to kill as many as they could.

The horde gave up on the van as more lightning strikes hit. The lightning was doing far more damage now. The van was able to pull away, and had a brief respite. They got far enough away, and Lazarus yelled at Sam to stop the van. The van came to a shuddering halt as wheels threw up a curtain of gravel.

"Sam, I need you back here!"

Lazarus couldn't get unbuckled in time, so he pulled his Kabar and cut through the seat belts. Attaching his carabineer had been a stroke of genius. He had bounced around in the back, and had almost been thrown out time after time as the van bounced across shattered alien bodies and the broken landscape. As it was, he had a devil of a time keeping the weapons and munitions from falling out as he engaged the aliens with the M60. Sam came running back, and Lazarus pulled out one of the AT-4s. Sam stepped to the side so that the back blast wouldn't hit the interior of the van. He sighted on the huge bulk in front of him, and pulled the trigger. The AT-4's tail flame lit up the dark as the rocket shot towards the giant creature.

Lazarus didn't stop there. He threw another to Sam. Sam lined up, and fired again. The first rocket hit the giant creature, and it screamed its outrage as it took damage. One, two, three, four AT-4's hit the creature. One of the creature's arms hung by a thread. There was blood gushing down the side of the monstrosity.

"I need the Javelins," Sam screamed as the horde noticed what was happening to its master. They turned, and started running towards the van. Only a few were left at the portal. Lilith increased her salvos of hellfire, immolating more of the horde aliens. More lightning strikes took out aliens as well.

Sam raised the Javelin, sighted in, and pulled the trigger. At first, Ragosh thought that the strange magic arrow had missed as the rocket flew out, then shot straight up. Ragosh soon realized his mistake as he traced the arc of the missile. The Javelin arced up, then turned and flew straight down, the heat of the great bulk lighting up in infrared like the heart of a volcano, drawing the heat seeking missile directly to it. The first one punched straight through the top of the chest, and burned through, exploding deep inside. The second one couldn't have been aimed any better, or any luckier. It arched straight down the gigantic maw, following thousands of pulped corpses.

Lazarus watched as the first Javelin punched into the chest. The great chest expand as the explosion ripped through whatever kind of vitals the great monster possessed. The second Javelin didn't explode until it had gone deep into the monster. The gut seemed expand endlessly. The gut ripped, spilling the entrails across the front of the monster. The great bulk tilted as it died. This doomed the slaves under the great throne. The uneven weight of the carcass caused first one side of the great throne to crash down, and then the other side settled as well. Infinite screams sounded as the slaves were crushed.

With Ragosh dead, the magic dissipated. The great horde died. They died hideous deaths as millennia of agelessness caught up instantaneously. Some of them turned to dust. Others exploded. One seemed to shatter. Different phenotypes died in different, equally hideous, unique ways as magical energies

stilled. About a thousand of younger horde members survived. Lazarus opened up with the machinegun to rake the survivors.

“Unexpected,” Sam said.

Sam stopped, looked at Lazarus. Lazarus looked back at him. The sound of the machinegun stilled. They both turned to look at the portal. Lilith looked as well.

Lilith didn’t even have to ask, she ran for the van. Sam and Lazarus were right on her heels. Sam had the van fired up before they even had their seats. Another curtain of gravel flew as they turned and drove as fast as possible towards the portal.

On the great corpse, the gems cracked and the magic whorls of the tattoos faded. The great jewel tumbled to the ground.

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Darcy woke up. She didn’t know where she was. She heard Ragosh call to her. She sat up, gathered her legs under her, and stood up. She saw the dead figure of Dargonth lying on the ground. Around her, corpses lay scattered. Nothing in the mine was alive but her. The portal still pulsed, though she felt it collapsing.

Her plans were ruined. She was upset. She just wanted her mother and father back. Hazy memories of her parents disappearing overwhelmed her. She began crying, tears running down her face. If only Daddy hadn’t yelled at her, this never would have happened. She was only a little girl. She didn’t know. Daddy shouldn’t have yelled at her. When Daddy disappeared, Mommy had yelled at her, also.

She could get them back, though. She knew that. Things had been spoiled here, but she could still get them back. She knew it, because the voice told her she could. She walked forward, towards the portal. She stopped at the edge, and held her hand out.

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Sam had the accelerator all the way to the floor. Lazarus looked over at the speedometer. It was jumping between sixty and eighty miles an hour. He just hoped that Sam would be able to thread the eye of the needle when they hit the portal.

He looked ahead, “What the hell?”

Sam nodded, “I see it, too.”

There was a lone figure standing at the portal. Lazarus wasn’t sure, but he thought it was Darcy. She had one hand up.

“What do I do?” Sam asked.

“What do you think you do? If she doesn’t get out of the way, you run her over!” Lilith screamed.

Sam glanced over at Lazarus. Lazarus nodded.

Something caught the corner of Lazarus’ eye as it flew past the van. It glinted as it flew.

“What the hell was that?” Lilith asked.

Lazarus knew what it was. It was the jewel that they had seen in the center of the behemoth’s chest. He had a very bad feeling about what was going to happen next. The jewel flew until it hit Darcy’s hand. They weren’t too far behind it. They were so close to getting through. Then disaster struck.

Darcy stepped back from the portal, and it slammed shut with a violence that sent a visible shock wave through the air. The shock wave hit the van, and Sam had to stand on the brakes to keep from hitting what was now a solid wall of stone in front of them. He twisted the steering wheel to avoid the rock wall. The van turned sideways and slid to a stop, tipping and almost turning over. The side of the van touched the stone and the van fell back down on all four tires.

They were alive, but just barely. Lazarus cursed. Lilith cursed. Sam's broken heart showed plainly on his face.

Lazarus looked at Sam, "Darcy, queen of demons," He paused, "I didn't see that coming."

Lilith folded her arms across her chest. In her pique, she said, "You should have let me kill her."

Sam growled.

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The van was still sitting next to the rock face. They had a fire burning between the van and the rock wall. Lilith was sitting in the side door of the van, holding her hands out to catch the heat of the fire. Sam and Lazarus had pulled out camp chairs to sit on. The remnants of ammunition boxes had been splintered to feed the fire. Sam was making coffee in three army surplus canteen cups. Water was boiling in the cups, and Sam was using a handkerchief to dip coffee into the cups and steep it. Lilith was chewing gum from an MRE meal. Strange stars in an unknown sky flickered above them.

"And you guys were upset that I had to stop at the Bisbee Coffee Company."

Sam spoke, "In retrospect, I believe that may have been a good decision on your part, Eli."

"Oooh, a three syllable word. Watch it, you might hurt yourself, Sam."

Sam scowled at Lilith, "You may be immortal on the other side of the portal, but I wonder what would happen if you were killed on this side."

"Do you think you have the juice to try, Baby?" she purred.

Lazarus held up the palm of a hand towards each of them, to calm down the interaction between the two. "Now, I think we may want to pool our resources, not divide them. We still have to figure out how to get back to our own world," Lazarus interjected. "Probably best if we waited to kill each other until we get back."

Sam settled back to making coffee, a growl welling up from deep in his chest, frustration from not being able to deliver destruction to Lilith.

Lilith had her legs crossed, the suspended foot kicking out a tempo that matched her jaw as she chewed her gum.

"So, Eli, that lightning we saw shooting across the field as we fought that demon horde. Who do you think that was?" Sam asked.

Lazarus shrugged, "Not sure. Whatever it was saved our bacon back there. The M60 and the hand grenades were taking out a chunk, but they were still going to take us down before we could hit that gigantic tub of lard with the missiles."

A voice boomed from the darkness surrounding the van, "And you were lucky in your choice of weapons."

Fire blazed up around Lilith's hands. Sam pulled his pistol and aimed in the general direction of the voice. Twin swords appeared in Lazarus' hands, and he twisted around, standing as he shifted, to meet whatever fate was behind him.

"Don't worry, if I wanted to kill you, I think I would have done it without alerting you first."

"Who are you?" Lazarus asked.

"I believe you stated it as me being the one who saved your bacon."

Lazarus lowered his swords. Lilith dialed back the hellfire. Sam pointed his pistol down towards the dirt. None of them relaxed completely, though. They thought they had killed all the aliens after the portal closed, but you never know.

"Do you mind if I approach the fire? Or are you going to let me stand out here in the cold all night?"

"Sure, come on in. Just please don't do anything that might be viewed as provocative. I'd hate to have to kill you before you introduce yourself."

"Ah, you always were jumpy, Eli."

A figure walked forward into the light. Lazarus recognized him. Lilith figured it out pretty quickly as well. Sam didn't have a clue though, "Eli, how does he know your name?"

The figure's secrets gave way to the light of the fire. Medium height in the modern world, he would have seemed much taller in antiquity. A nimbus of wild, gray hair surrounded his head. The long beard looked like it hadn't seen a comb in quite some time. Bluish-gray eyes took in the scene before him. It was a kindly face, but Lazarus knew that face could turn into a terrifying visage in battle. A long sword was strapped to the left side of his body. Over his robes, he wore leather armor.

The man walked forward, "How are you, Eli?" He turned to Lilith, "And you Lilith? I must say I'm very surprised to see you both in such a cordial setting. Usually, you're set on killing each other."

The man turned towards Sam, "Good Lord, this one is a veritable giant among men. Is he human? Or is he one of the Titans of old?"

Sam looked at Eli, confused.

Lazarus did the introductions, "Sam, this is Aurelius Ambrosius, also known as Myrddin Wyllt. Or, as you would know his more modern name, Merlin."

Sam's jaw would have hit the ground if it wasn't attached to his head.

"Myrddin, this is my young friend, Sam Diabo."

Myrddin stepped forward and pointed at the cups on the fire, "Is there any way I might be able to sample some of that brew? It smells very good."

Sam nodded, "yeah, sure, you can have my cup." He proceeded to show Myrddin how to hold the handle of the canteen cup so that he could drink.

"This is very good," Myrddin said, after taking a sip.

Lazarus nodded, "Yeah, it's the modern world's biggest addiction. Billions of people worldwide need a cup or two to start their day."

Sam passed the other two cups to Lazarus and Lilith, and began making another one for himself.

"So, Myrddin, what brings you here?" Lilith asked. She flashed her smile at him. She leaned forward, the fabric of her t-shirt straining.

Myrddin noticed and appreciated her efforts, “Well, demon witch, I’m here because of that.” He hooked a thumb back at the monstrous carcass behind him.

The pieces fell together for Sam, “Oh, you were the one using the lightening against the horde.

Myrddin nodded, “yes, I was. I could use the magic against the horde, but it would have done no good against their master.”

“Why not?” Lazarus asked.

Myrddin pointed in a circular fashion at his own chest, describing a pattern, “You saw all of those whorled lines around the body of the great beast?”

They all nodded.

“Well, that was protective magic to ward off destructive spells directed at the great beast.” Myrddin took another drink of the coffee, “You were very lucky to have such destructive arrows. I don’t think Ragosh even thought that he could be attacked in such a way.”

“Well, we’re just happy that we killed,” Lazarus paused, thinking, “what was it you called it, Ragosh?”

Myrddin chuckled, “Well, I didn’t say that, exactly.”

Lazarus was perplexed, as were Lilith and Sam.

“What do you mean? Its carcass is sitting right over there. I know we killed it. We saw it die.” Lazarus asked.

Myrddin shook his head, “No, you didn’t kill Ragosh. Ragosh is still very much alive. All you did was kill the body that Ragosh was wearing; in fact, had been wearing for a very, long time. That big carcass isn’t Ragosh. Ragosh was the jewel that was sitting in the middle of the monster’s chest.”

“You mean the jewel that flew through the air and Darcy grabbed right before the portal closed?”

“Oh, is that the woman’s name? Yes, the jewel that Darcy grabbed.”

Lazarus slapped his forehead, “Oh, good God, I am such a twit.”

Myrddin nodded, “Yes,” he took a sip of coffee, and smacked his lips, “You are. Plus, not only did you not keep Ragosh from entering your dimension, but you completely spoiled my plans on getting back home.”

Curses flowed from all three.

Myrddin finished the dregs of his coffee, “Exactly.”

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They finished the coffee. It was a long day, and it was time to rack out. Lilith yawned, stretched for the benefit of the men, and stood up.

She stared at Lazarus, “Time for some sleep.”

Lazarus watched her as she turned and walked around to the back of the van. His pulse was pounding. She stopped, and bent down to do something with her shoe. Lazarus was staring at a perfect heart shape. Her jeans were pulled down just far enough so that he could see the back triangle of the thong that she was wearing.

“Penny for your thoughts, Eli?” Sam asked.

Lazarus kept staring, “I’m wondering if sex with a demonic succubus is a venial sin, if you’re already married to her, and you aren’t in the same dimension as the

one who has to forgive your sins.” He stood up, and walked towards where Lilith had disappeared.

“Ah, Eli, are you sure that’s a good idea?” Sam asked.

Lazarus shrugged and kept walking.

She was waiting for him at the back of the van. He walked to her, slowly. She leaned against the van, waiting, hands behind her. He put his hands on her waist, and looked deeply into her eyes. He leaned forward, and whispered in her ear, “Thank you, I got your message.”

She smiled, then leaned forward to nibble on his ear lobe, “What message was that?” She leaned back. Her face betrayed nothing, but there was amusement in her eyes.

He leaned forward again, and kissed her at the juncture of her jaw and neck, “Your warning.”

Her head arched back so that he could access more of her neck. He kept kissing the soft skin. She moaned as he continued. Her tongue snaked into his ear, then she whispered again, “I gave you a warning?” He leaned back to see her sardonic smile.

She wasn’t going to give it up, still playing her part.

“About Darcy, about the sacrifice. If you hadn’t told me, I wouldn’t have known.”

The kisses continued as they enjoyed the physical contact, the sensual sensations.

“I guess I just underestimated you,” she teased.

Their hands roamed each other’s body as their hearts beat faster.

“I think I appreciate the constraints that bind you.”

“Well, a girl can’t be too careful,” she pulled his shirt out of his pants so that she could run her hands over his skin. “I never know who’s watching, or who they work for. His spies are Legion. I had to promise him you, to persuade him to let me work with you.” Her fingers dipped inside of his belt. She nipped at his ear again, playfully, but with purpose. She came clean with him, “There’s something else in play. I have to be careful. You’re lucky I still need your help.”

“You’re organization, or mine?”

“I’m not sure yet. Maybe neither.”

He pulled back, watching her face, “If neither of our organizations, then who?”

She shook her head, “Better not to say right now. I have suspicions, but nothing concrete. There are,” she hesitated, “other possibilities. Ancient possibilities.”

“What possibilities?”

She shook her head again, but she shared one more thing with him, “I didn’t do that to Darcy. Someone else had touched her mind. She was already like that when I found her. Somebody else made the connection between Darcy and Ragosh.”

Her reticence intrigued him, as did the identity of others. The new information about Darcy was intriguing as well. Her expression was serious. He didn’t push her for more information. He would have to draw the information from her slowly, and wait until she was ready to spill.

“Thanks anyway.”

“My pleasure,” she answered.

“Not yet, but it’s going to be.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, the seriousness gone, a smile on her face.

“I mean, we have to make this look very realistic. You never know who’s watching,” he replied. “His spies could be everywhere.”

“Are you sure about this, Eli?” she asked.

He shook his head, “No. What about you?”

She lightly kissed his lips, signifying more than simple passion, something deeper. She brought both hands up to rub the back of his neck.

“I can’t change, Eli. I am who I am. You know who I work for.”

He nodded, “I know.”

“What about them?”

“Them who?”

“You know, your bosses.”

“They’ll understand. I’m doing this to protect my source. It’s business.”

She giggled. He kissed her smile. It was a deep, lingering kiss. He didn’t rush. He wanted to enjoy it. She tasted sweet. Even with all of the hellfire and death, she still smelled like strawberries.

At first, she didn’t respond. Then she returned his kiss. She spread her lips, and her tongue darted forward. The kiss was deep, warm. He shifted his hands, and his arms went around her waist. He pulled her to him with a strength that surprised her.

Her hands pulled against his neck, insistent as they grew more eager. A moan sounded, and neither one knew who it was from.

Lazarus pulled away from the kiss, panting.

Lilith looked at him, “What?”

He motioned for her to be patient. He leaned into the van. He rummaged around, and pulled out two sleeping bags.

She smiled, “Naughty boy.”

He grabbed her hand, and led her into the dark, away from the van. He spread the sleeping bags on the ground, then turned back to her.

They melted into each other. Buttons popped and flew as they eagerly stripped each other out of their clothes. They held each other up, giggling as they propped each other up to untie and take boots off. The rest of the clothes came off next. There was nothing between them now. He walked to her, and held her close. They kissed, and explored. His body responded to her. Lazarus picked her up, and she wrapped her legs around him. Slowly, he lowered her to the sleeping bags.

Much later, when they had finished, he looked at her, “Truce.”

Her laughter burst out, echoing off of the rock face, “Sure, truce. For now.”

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On the other side of the van, Myrddin had taken Lilith’s seat in the door, “Now that, is one incredibly complicated relationship.”

Sam nodded, “You have no idea. It’s like Ike and Tina Turner, only Lilith is Ike, and Eli is Tina.”

“Who’s Ike and Tina Turner?” Myrddin asked.

They heard the moans start. It was going to be a long night. Sam sighed, and thought about Darcy. Talk about your complicated relationships. The moans grew louder. Sam looked out into the darkness.

“If the van’s a rockin, don’t bother knockin’,” he said.
“What’s a van?” Myrddin asked.
Sam sighed again.

Epilogue

A New Player in Town.

Major Hartman didn’t know what to do. She had no more targets to engage, the floor of the pit was covered in bestial, foul corpses, and Eli had disappeared through an interdimensional hole. The only target left was the young woman that Eli and Sam had arrived with. Hartman and her team watched Darcy through their telescopes.

“What do you want to do?” Shai Chayat, the Israeli soldier asked her.

Hartman shook her head, “I don’t think there’s anything else we can do right now. I don’t know what happened to Eli.”

Master Sergeant Patterson, Marines, Force Recon asked, “What about the girl down there?”

“She seems harmless. She’s not doing anything. Eli didn’t say anything about her. He just told me that if they had on a vest like his, we don’t engage.”

She turned to the team, “I think we can leave now. We did what we came here to do. The invasion has been stopped. Until Eli shows up and gives us more marching orders, I say we go and get dinner.”

The group concurred. They picked up their rifles, and headed back to their vehicles.

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Darcy was unhappy. She had one hell of a headache. It was hard to think, hard to concentrate. She didn’t know where Sam was. She didn’t know where the van had gone to. She never imagined that Eli and Sam would leave her. She leaned against one of the motorcycles. There were dead alien bodies everywhere.

She stared down at the huge gem in her hands. It was as big as her head. In its depths, strange colors swam in scintillating patterns. Something was in there. She didn’t know what it was, but she knew it was the key to finding her parents. Images were flashing through her mind, but the thoughts didn’t make sense to her. She had a vision of the gem, attached to her chest. It wouldn’t fit though. It was too big.

She looked at the gem, then turned it over. She had an idea. She was very good with minerals. She started to concentrate. The gem shuddered in her hands. There was a moan on the wind. The sound of glass tinkling sounded across the pit floor. She looked at the gem again. The huge gem looked smaller. But it wasn’t enough. It wouldn’t do what she wanted. She was getting some kind of resistance.

She frowned. She knew what she wanted, and projected that reality into the jewel. The resistance eased. It was as if the jewel suddenly understood. She felt

power, like she had never felt before. She knew she was getting help from somewhere or someone. What she had been previously, was a shadow to what she was now. This gem would do her bidding. She concentrated, drawing on the strength of the magic.

The gem shuddered. She closed her eyes, and felt the structure of the gem with her mind. She shifted the crystalline structure, made it more compact. She could feel it shift in her hands. She sat there, leaning against the motorcycle, eyes closed, for a good, long time. When she finally opened her eyes again, the light was beginning to dim. She looked down at her hand. She could see a light coating of dust on her hands that glittered as it whirled away on the wind. The gem was much smaller now. She could hold it in one hand, with her fingers folded around it.

She stared at the gem, then she made her decision. She brought her hand up, and held the gem over her heart, next to her skin. A flare of light blossomed as she pressed the gem to her skin. The gem eagerly melded with her.

The gem pulsed in time with Darcy's heart. She smiled. She walked over to the demon sword, and pulled it from Mephistopheles withered corpse. She leaned it against one shoulder, and began walking up the road to the top of the mine.

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He waited. He was sitting in the driver's seat of a black, 1965 Lincoln Continental convertible, with suicide doors. He was a big man, broad shoulders. He had what was left of a cigar dangling from his lips. He had broad, brutal features, framed by blond hair. He had dark stubble on his face. His arms were thick, muscular, and hairy. He wore a Hawaiian shirt, chinos, and docksider shoes. Chest hair curled out of the v of his shirt. Thick fingers held a lighter up to the battered cigar, and he puffed as he tried to get it to light again.

She got to the top of the pit, and walked towards the tourist center. The sun had gone down hours ago. He switched on the lights so that he could watch her. She walked towards the car. He studied her good looks. Another time, he would have made his play, or, if that didn't work, he would have forced the issue. This wasn't the time or place for that kind of thing though, not with what he was facing. That could end up being very dangerous for him. The big, curved sword angled on her shoulder, moaning like the wind, punctuated that thought for him.

He got out of the car, and walked forward towards her, "Long walk up, huh?"

She looked at him, "Who are you?"

He smiled, and took the cigar out of his mouth, "I'm what you call an emissary. I have a friend that would like to talk to you."

She didn't say anything for a few moments. She watched him as she stood there. For a moment, he thought he would have to defend himself against her. Then she spoke, "Your boss?"

He shook his head, "No, not the boss. Another associate of mine. If we can all talk, maybe make a deal, I may not have to worry about my boss anymore."

She studied him for a moment, then nodded, "Ambitious, I get it. Okay, I can meet with your 'associate.'"

His smile was genuine now. He knew he had passed the danger point, though he wasn't safe yet. He pointed at himself, "My name's Beelzebub, but you can just call me Bill if you want to. My associate has a place for us to meet."

He motioned to the car, "Can I give you a lift. I'll fill you in on the particulars along the way."

Ragosh needed to know the players in this reality. Using this demon would help him figure out how he needed to play his hand. Ragosh looked at the car. He walked over, and laid the demon sword in the back seat. He searched the memories of his host, opened the door, and sat down. The new body was interesting. It would take some time to get used to it.

Beelzebub sat back in the car, and closed his door. He fired up the engine. He looked over at Ragosh. He motioned to the door. Ragosh looked over at Beelzebub's side of the vehicle, figured it out, and the passenger door thumped shut.

Beelzebub smiled, then turned on the radio. They drove off with "Bloody Kisses," by Type O Negative playing on the radio.

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She sat in her room. The room didn't feel right to her, though. It was different. It seemed bigger than it should be. The furniture wasn't the right size. She walked over to the door, and tried to turn the handle. The door wouldn't open. She looked around. She walked over to the window, and pulled the curtains aside. There was nothing on the other side of the glass. It wasn't as if it was night. Instead, there was just, nothing.

She looked around. The ratios were off. She looked down at her body, and then looked at her hands. She realized what the problem was. The room around her was set up from when she was a child. The room was from her memories. It was the way her room was when she was a little girl. All of the changes that had occurred since she lost her mother and father were gone. It was as if she had never grown up. She was looking at the room from the height of a four year old girl, even though she was fully grown.

She looked at everything in the room. It was all there, everything from her childhood. She tried the door again. She tried to open the window. It wouldn't open. She tried breaking the window. The chair thumped against it, and the glass wouldn't shatter, no matter how many times, and how hard she hit it. She banged on the door, and eventually, started banging on the walls. She did this for a very long time.

She started yelling. When that didn't help, she cried. She fell asleep and then woke up, over and over again. She remembered that she had broken things, ripped things, and tore things. But nothing was damaged. It was the same as it had been when she first appeared in the room.

She sat down on the floor, wrapped her arms around her legs, and began rocking. Darcy wondered if she would ever see Sam again.

