

BETRAYAL

A DEMON SQUAD STORY

TIM MARQUITZ

Betrayal

By Tim Marquitz

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Betrayal

(Scarlett's Story)

As I had every evening since I'd returned to Heaven, I knelt outside the throne room of God and prayed for his return.

And as it had been every other night, my prayers went unanswered.

My knees were stiff from kneeling upon the cold tiles, so I rose to my feet with an empty sigh, hearing others of my brethren doing the same around me. The flickers of God's essence, which clung to the Kingdom, were more a vexation tonight than they'd ever been. Too great a presence to be completely scoured away, what remained was but the slightest hint of a scent, the flutter of a dying breath; just enough to remind me of what we'd lost. Tonight it seemed a glimmer more than usual, but it was no comfort.

God was gone, and we were still alone.

I glanced about the hall, meeting the eyes of my brethren in turn. Sorrow filled many of them, cold resolution in the rest. Several of the retiring angels nodded and waved in my direction as they made their way from the temple. A few simply turned and left without acknowledgement.

It was a frustration I'd largely learned to live with.

Though I'd cast aside my demonic heritage, wholly embracing the light of the Lord, there were still those who felt I was little better than the Fallen and should be cast out. Their antipathy had been held in check when God sat upon the Throne, but His disappearance was a spur to many who believed the influence of Lucifer, and those of his line, had been the cause of God's departure. No longer leashed to the Father's disapproval, their anger had slithered through the cracks and been set loose.

The return of Duke Forcalor had done nothing to lessen the bitterness of their beliefs, however unfounded. Granted free will, they would think as they would, and nothing but time or the return of God could change that.

I strolled the along the courtyard path on my way home, the clinging memories of the Father heavy on my mind. I had known him so short a time, but his absolute acceptance of my devotion and place in Heaven had been the greatest moment in my existence. Born in Hell, I did not fit amongst the demons, or even the Nephilim who walked the Earth, the call of the Choir ringing loudest in my breast since the moment of my birth. *I knew where I belonged.*

He had seen that in me, and had rewarded my obeisance, but now He was gone. I wished only to prove my dedication once more and bring back the Heaven I'd known under His guidance.

It seemed a dream. Wishing to wrap myself inside its warm contentedness, I returned home. One last prayer to the void as I crawled beneath the covers of my bed, I lay my head to rest.

Sleep was slow to come.

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The whisper of steel pulled me from my dreams.

Honed by the sharpened edge of battle, I gave no thought to anything save survival. I rolled from the bed and lashed out as I dove to claim my blade. My shin collided with rigid muscle, and I heard the whoosh of lost breath as I leaped past my unknown assailant. My fingers settled on the pommel of my sword, and I drew it free, its confident song filling the air.

Everto in hand, I spun about to see the blade of an axe buried in the mattress where my head laid just moments before. Golden hands clasped its leather-wrapped shaft and worked to pull it free as I advanced on instinct. I took only one step before I could take no more. My feet seemed to fill with lead as my sleep-sodden mind processed what my eyes saw. Awareness roared to life.

This was no demon that stood before me, no zealot of the dark arts come to kill me in my slumber, but one of my own kind; an angel, one I'd known my entire life.

"Valore?" I could barely bring myself to name him under the weight of what he'd done. He had tried to kill me, here in my home; *here* in Heaven. For all the whispered complaints and frustrated stares of the Choir, I could never have imagined such a heinous act being committed in the Kingdom. My strength withered at the thought, and Everto drooped at the end of my trembling arm. I could barely feel it in my hand.

Valore pulled the axe free and turned to me with a grin, one so far removed from the murderous act he had just tried to commit as to make me question whether I was yet awake.

"Come now, did you truly think you could betray Gabriel and not believe his retribution would find you?"

A scream erupted outside, its terror setting my pulse to pounding, followed by another, and still another. Though I didn't recognize the voices, their sounds raw with agony and sick with betrayal, there was no longer any doubt this was just a dream. Death had come to Heaven by the cruelest of means. A cloying numbness seemed to envelop me as I stared at my would-be assassin. A prayer came to mind right after, and I swallowed it back, its taste bitter given the circumstances. There was no Lord to hear, to save His people.

Valore advanced, his axe swaying contemptuously before him. His smile grew sharper. "Give in to the inevitable, Scarlett. You're no better than your precious duke, just another demon pretending to be one of *us*. You don't belong here. You never did."

His words sunk in like talons, tearing at my heart. I'd served God as loyally and faithfully as any other, and for Valore to claim otherwise was a venomous wound. I felt its blow hit home, his declaration brushing aside all my sacrifices to prove myself to the Choir. Despite all I'd done to earn the respect of my kin, here was the sad truth of it; I was still an outsider, my value tainted by the demonic blood that ran through my veins. I could feel it even now, the sear of it as it flowed through me, screaming for my acceptance.

I glared at Valore as he hefted his axe, readying to strike me down. The grin never left his lips. He had spoken the truth. I was everything he said I was. The axe dropped.

Everto caught the haft with the edge just inches from my skull. I met Valore's bright eyes, the words of my cousin echoing through my mind. *There are two types of people in life: enemies and those who will become enemies. It's sometimes better just to kill them all and worry about sorting out the pieces later.* Frank sometimes made a twisted sense. I knew then what needed to be done.

Anger welled up inside me and chased away my weakness. My grip tightened upon the hilt. I stepped left and twisted my wrist to bring Everto around. As the axe finished its descent, my blade sunk into the meat of Valore's biceps. His scream joined those that filled the air outside. His arm fell limp to his side. A quick flick of Everto severed the tendon at the elbow of Valore's other arm. His axe slipped from his grip to clatter to the floor.

"For all my trials to be a part of the Choir, I've had to scratch and claw my way to but a meager acceptance. If my torment has done nothing else, it has forced me to become the best I can be. And though the cursed blood of devils taints my lineage, it was *you*

who stood above my bed with intent to slaughter me in my sleep. Tell me now, Valore, who is the true demon here?"

He opened his mouth to answer, but there were no words of his I wished to hear. I thrust Everto into his throat, the tip piercing through his flesh and sinking into the marbled wall behind him with a grating screech. He twitched and grasped at the blade, blood gushing between his fingers. With wide eyes, he starred at me, his smile gone from his lips at last.

Though Valore had meant to kill me, I could find no satisfaction in his suffering. I twisted my sword and freed it from his neck, letting him slide to the floor. His life spilled from his wounds, puddling about him as he breathed his last. I slipped my blade between his ribs and stopped his heart. It was all the mercy I could bring myself to offer. Though I knew He would not hear, I sent thanks to the Father that Valore's soul would find sanctuary under Metatron's care, and I would not be forced to consume his essence. I could not live with Valore's spirit being a part of me.

Yet more screams battered my ringing ears, and I knew the horror that had visited my home was but a pale shade of that which awaited me outside. I drew a deep breath and stared at the portal that separated me from the chaos beyond. Despite Valore's words, the choir was my family. No matter what I might face, they needed me. If I were to die today, I would do so protecting those I love. God could ask nothing more of me; no one could.

I stepped from my home to find that Hell had come to my beloved Heaven. Angels battled angels in the roiling white skies. The air was filled with the sounds of war, the smell of charred flesh and blood. Brilliant bursts of energy illuminated the angels who fell to the ground as a rain of corpses. The fury that had overtaken me as I struck down Valore faltered in my breast. All around me were the remains of my family, the dead and dying littering the holy courtyard and filling my ears with their wails of pain and sorrow. The Choir was dying.

"Scarlett! Come to me," a strong voice cried out from behind me.

I spun to see Duke Forcalor waving to me with his free hand, his other holding his midnight blade at the ready. The twisted spikes that adorned his reddened plate mail were covered in the dark shimmer of blood, his long white hair, wild and free of its usual binds, was streaked with crimson. He had not been spared a part in the revolt. I ran to his side as he struck down a young angel that dared to attack him. The boy died with a snarl on his lips.

There was sadness in Forcalor's eyes as he turned to look at me. "Gabriel has set us against each other, and I fear I am the cause." He was gracious not to mention my own bloodlines as he stared out across the plains. A tear spilled down his cheek, mixing with the claret that clung thick to it. "We are losing Heaven, child, but we must fight on."

His words rang inside me, dark and chilling. Though the duke had been one of the first of the Fallen, cast from Heaven, Forcalor had always been a sensitive soul. Loyal to a fault to his brother, he had stood beside Lucifer as they fell to Hell, but he had never cursed the Father for what He'd done. And while a demon in the flesh, he was an angel at his core. His courage lit the fuse of my own.

"Can we not rally the loyal remains of the Choir to strike back?"

He shook his head. "Michael has taken up arms against us as well, and has apparently orchestrated the massacre of those who did not stand against my return to the Kingdom. Most of our brethren have been murdered in their sleep, our numbers a pitiful few against the tide of those who would see Gabriel take the Throne." His words came out in a growl. "Uriel still holds Eden. It is there where we must make our stand."

Forcalor's gaze snapped away as a handful of warriors descended upon us. The duke stepped to meet them. "Stand aside, Scarlett. I could not bear the scorn of your mother's spirit should these heretics harm you." He dropped the first of the rebels before he

finished speaking. The second fell but an instant later, a reddened geyser spewing up from where his head had only just been.

Valore's blood still staining my hands, his treason fresh in my mind, I could not bring myself to hold back. Those who would slay the innocent in their sleep were no kindred to me. I darted out from behind the duke and let my blade loose. While named Slayer of Demons, Everto Trucido's sharpened edge worked just as well on the flesh of angels. The third of the rebels would learn this firsthand.

His hand glistening with golden energy, I took it off at the wrist. I silenced his scream by burying my blade beneath his chin, pinning his tongue to the roof of his mouth as the steel slid through to crack the dome of his skull. His eyes rolled in their sockets and I felt his weight upon my sword arm.

Forcalor finished the others before I could draw my weapon loose. "Come, child. We must reach Uriel before he is forced to seal the Garden and we are trapped outside." He grabbed my arm and pulled me along. "To Eden, my brothers," he screamed as we ran. Thunder roared, competing with his voice. "Rally to Eden if you would live!"

As we closed upon the Garden, it was clear Gabriel had known where we would make our stand. Generals on high, He and Michael sent wave after wave of their rebellious legions to assault the gates of Eden. Uriel held strong, an army of desperate angels at his back, though it seemed only a matter of time before they were overcome.

Uriel's cherubic face out of place on the field of death, he was no less a warrior for his boyish appearance. Dressed in full battle regalia, save for a helm, his sea-green armor reflected his position in the Angelic Choir. An image of the Tree of Life was impressed upon his breastplate in the finest gold, its roots circling his limbs, and winding their leafy way to his fingers and toes to begin the journey upwards once more. His fiery sword, not simply enwreathed in fire, but made wholly of the flickering tongues of God's flame, which set light to the sun, laid waste to any who dared come too close.

Rebel angels melted away at its touch as those allied to Uriel stood at his side and defended the flanks. For all his majesty, it was clear the battle was already turning against the guardian of Eden. He looked frayed and worn, as did Forcalor. It was not the fight itself tiring them, but the nature of the enemy and the field upon which the conflict arose. Never before, not even in the days before Lucifer's fall, has there been blood shed upon the soil of Heaven.

God would never allow such treason. A quiet chuckle slipped loose at the thought as I was once again reminded of our abandonment. We were alone, even here in Heaven.

A massive *boom* shook me from my sickened reverie, and I glanced up to see Gabriel and Michael joining the fray. The storm of their might showered Uriel and his forces with a rain of magical fire. Uriel stumbled back toward the open gates, defending as he went.

"I have to help him," Forcalor growled through clenched teeth as a wave of rebel angels followed on the heels of the archangels' attack. He said no more as he raced to bolster Uriel. I followed at his heels. Gabriel's forces were upon us before we reached the gates.

Forcalor flung aside the first of his attackers. I wasn't so fortunate.

My stomach churned at what I must do, and I felt as though my sword couldn't move fast enough. I cut down several of the heretics as they closed, but for every blow I delivered, I received three in turn. There were simply too many.

Bursts of energy exploded all about me and I felt my hair catch fire, the flesh of my scalp blistering as I drew left to skewer yet another angel I'd once loved as a brother. The look in his golden eyes slowed my hand further. The blood spilling from my wounds did little to help.

Though I fought on, I could feel myself weakening. My ribs ached with every breath, a furnace in my lungs. Everto sat heavy in my hand, my knuckles showing white

beneath the crimson coat of blood. My magic reined in for defense, to keep the fiery assault at bay, I could not hold the rebels at range. Dozens of bodies littered the ground about me, the courtyard tiles slick with the fluids of dead and dying angels.

And yet they still came.

I could hear their muffled shouts of anger, their cries for my head. Each speared my heart in turn and fueled my desire to rid them from my home. Sadly, passion is no shield in time of war. My vision blurred by weariness and the fog of battle, I didn't see the angel who'd slipped past my guard until it was too late.

I spun to meet his blow, but he moved faster. His blade crashed into my left hand. I felt my fingers snap, the bones in my palm crushed under the pressure. White light filled my eyes and I felt my legs wobble beneath me. It had only been by luck that I'd turned his sword aside, the flat connecting with my hand rather than the edge. It made little difference in the pain, though I'd die with all my fingers.

No adrenaline to fight the agony that raged up my arm, I crumpled to my knees as the rebel angel closed. His gaze locked on mine and I saw him then for who he truly was; Jatar. We had been lovers once, and I'd believed friends after. He laughed as he stood over me, putting the lie to my belief. The remnants of my heart burst inside my chest.

"Gabriel will reward me greatly for slaying the demon-bitch who poisons the Kingdom." His words were daggers, carving away the moments we'd had together. He drew his sword above his head and grinned as though we had never been anything but enemies. I couldn't bring myself to try and stop him.

The hazel of Jatar's eyes suddenly turned red, then an abysmal black, before bursting from their sockets. His face melted away like so much candle wax, his body dropping into a heap on the tiles. And for all his intended cruelty, I couldn't help but mourn his loss.

Uriel stood where Jatar had just moments before, the sky ablaze behind him. He held out his hand to me. I could feel the heat of his sword as its fury washed over me.

“All that remains of Heaven is Eden, and I worry that too shall soon fall. I must close the gates before the battle bleeds into the Garden, but I would ask a sacrifice of you, Scarlett.”

As he helped me to feet, I could only nod.

A sad smile broke on his face. “Flee to Earth and find help, if there is any to be had. We cannot win this war alone.”

I suddenly regretted agreeing. “But my place is here, by y—”

“Then you will die with our beloved Kingdom,” he said without rancor. “We are lost, but by sealing Eden we might buy some time for the miraculous.”

“God has left us. There are no more miracles in the world,” my words were like gravestones, tumbling heavy from my mouth.

“Perhaps, but do not give in to despair. You fought for Heaven despite the odds against it, for though He might be gone from our world, the Father still lives within our hearts. If it is His will that we are to fall, then so be it, but I do not believe He would cast us aside so easily.”

I met Uriel’s eyes and saw the conviction that burned inside their depths. He truly believed there was still hope. I couldn’t refuse him his request, though I didn’t share his faith. I agreed to do as he asked. After, he turned back to the battle, clearing the way for me to reach Eden.

Slowed by my wounds, I stumbled through the gates and made my way across the Garden. Every step was agony to both my flesh and my heart. I could hear the battle at my back, its roar slowly fading as I left it behind. It felt as though I too was abandoning

Heaven as God had, leaving my people to die as I did nothing to save them. But I'd given my word to Uriel that I would seek out help, and so I would.

As I stepped through the Earth-side gates of Eden and fell into the bright blue sky, I could think of only one person I could turn to who might help to win Heaven free of its enemies.

God help us all.

A Note from the Author:

Thank you for taking the time to read *Betrayal*. While the Demon Squad books are all voiced by Frank "Triggaltheron" Trigg, the world has enough unique viewpoints outside of Frank's that I felt it would be a good experiment to try to bring another to life. As Scarlett plays such a pivotal role in *At the Gates*, she was the perfect test subject.

While different than usual, I hope you enjoyed this little foray outside of Frank's head.

And for those of you who feel it can't be Demon Squad without Frank, I've added a bonus story just for *you*.

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Thanks to Bastard and Mihir for all their wonderful ideas, and for telling me what they really think whether or not I want to hear it.

Prohibition Black and Blues

Maybe it's just me, but there's something inherently uncomfortable about having the barrel of a gun named *Tommy* shoved in your mouth.

"You tell Capone and Lou to keep their fingers out of North Side pockets, or Bugs is gonna cut 'em off, you get me?"

"Mmeha, mwii watchuh."

"What?"

I rolled my eyes toward the gun and raised my eyebrows. It took Paulie a couple of seconds, but he got it.

"Damn it, Jimmy. Take the gun outta his mouth so I can figure out what the Hell he's saying."

The monolithic unibrow of the caveman standing in front of me wiggled like an angry caterpillar, and I could have sworn I saw a dim light flicker in the windows of his eyes. He grunted and took a step back. The barrel yanked loose of my mouth with a wet pop. The grey steel was shiny with my spit, and I ran my tongue over my teeth trying to get rid of the taste of gun oil. It wasn't the worst thing I'd had in there, but I can't say I wanted a second helping. Paulie growled to remind me he'd asked a question.

"I said, 'Yeah, I gotcha,' Paulie."

"See there, Jimmy? I told you Frank was smarter than he looks."

I almost blushed at the compliment.

"You go on home now, and tell your uncle what I said. If he don't convince Capone

to keep his business out of Bugs' territory, folks on the south side of the line are gonna get shot." Paulie laughed and Jimmy joined in, chuckling like a gelded donkey.

The two turned away and started toward their car. As Paulie opened the driver's side door of his black Model-T, he glanced over at me. His smile bent his cheeks wide. "Hey, Frank, I'm curious. What kind of name is Ceefer anyway? It sure don't *sound* Italian."

I smiled right back. "It's an old family name."

"Well, you just make sure old Lou gets the message." He slid into his seat.

Jimmy shook his head. "Lou Ceefer. Sounds foreign, Paulie." He laughed as he hopped in the other side of the car. The barrel of his gun poked out the window after he closed the door. I could see them grinning behind the windshield.

If they only knew.

Lou Ceefer, my uncle, wasn't much for subtle. Of course, when you're the Devil, you don't have to be. That's why he sent me.

He'd ordered a torch job on a speakeasy Moran had just opened, right across the north-south line. In a better neighborhood, with the cops on the take, Bugs' place was drawing Capone's regulars *and* their money across the split. That didn't sit well with Capone.

Don't let it ever be said that Lucifer doesn't look out for his own. You make a deal with the Devil, you can bet your soul he holds up his end of the bargain.

I'd been casing the place, waiting for the night crowd to finally drift home, when Paulie cruised past. On foot, trying to be inconspicuous, I couldn't get off the street before the headlights hit me. On my way *toward* the club at four a.m., Paulie stopped to take a closer look. We'd bumped into each other a few times, so he recognized me. He knew I wasn't out sampling the night life. That's when I got to be cozy with *Tommy*.

Fortunately for me, Paulie isn't smart enough to figure out who Uncle Lou is, let alone put it together he isn't human, or that, by extension, neither am I. While a machine gun burst in the mouth would hurt worse than President Harding's economic policies, it wouldn't be fatal. Messy, certainly, but not deadly. Sure, I'd be on a liquid diet for a day or two, but I'd get over it.

Paulie probably thought I was just some punk kid following my uncle into the business. Guess he figured he could scare me a little and maybe I'd beg Lou to back off, afraid I'd get hurt or something. He'd thought wrong.

As the Ford roared to life outside the empty speakeasy, I waved to Bugs' goons, keeping the dumb smile on my face. It's always best if people think you're slow.

I strolled toward the driver's side, casually stuffing my hands into my coat. "Hey, Paulie, you think Bugs might need another guy? You know, some extra muscle, or something?" It also helped if they thought you were a coward.

Paulie's grin nearly made his eyes slant as he barked out a laugh. "You thinking of switching sides there, champ?"

Alongside the car, I gave a halfhearted shrug. "It seems to me — five — a guy's gotta — four — look out for himself — three — you know?"

Both Paulie and Jimmy stared at me like I'd lost my mind.

"What you countin' for?" Jimmy asked as Paulie's eyes went wide, the gears engaging somewhere inside his skull. There was no question as to who was the smarter of the two.

"No reason — one." I blew a kiss at Paulie as I slid the grenade through his open window. It landed in the floorboard with a solid thump, and I didn't hang out to see how they took it.

No cover on the street, I ducked low and ran with my hands over my head. My only

consolation for waiting so long to bug out was that having burning pieces of steel embedded in my ass was nowhere near as painful as swallowing a load of bullets.

You gotta look for the good in things.

The car went up with a roar. Shards of it peppered my back, knocking me flat on the street as a wash of heat whipped past. I barely felt the ground when I hit, the barrage of fiery bee stings lighting me up from behind. I wasn't winning this game of pin the tail on the jackass.

I kept my arms over my head and my cheek pressed against the cold road until the ping of shrapnel stopped and I didn't feel the bite of it any more. Through the tinny hum in my ears, I could hear the crackle of the flames that had engulfed the car. Couldn't hear much else though, but I knew it wouldn't be long before sirens rang out in the night. Bugs had the cops in his pocket and he'd be shaking them like his keys to get them out here to see what happened.

Up on my feet, I took a quick glance at the damage. Couldn't see much, but I imagined the whole of my back looked like what I *could* see, speckled with glimmers of silver and dots of red. My trench coat was pinned to my skin by metal debris and blood. It felt like a really bad case of sunburn, but it wasn't *too* bad.

I glanced over at the Model-T and whistled. Compared to those two, I'd gotten off easy. I peeled my coat off and half-embedded shrapnel pulled loose and *clinked* onto the street. I tossed the trench aside. My back would heal fine, but the coat had seen its last.

It wasn't but a second later when I heard the first of the sirens, off in the distance. I whistled, impressed. Normally, I'd beat feet and get my obviously involved ass down the road, but I still had a job to do. While the explosion had shattered the windows of the club, it was still standing. As much of a message as torching Bugs' goons was, it wasn't the one I'd been sent to deliver. Uncle Lou wasn't big on independent thought.

With my grenade gone, I'd have to do things the hard way. I looked to the burning

remnants of the Model-T and smiled. Everything I needed was right there. The sirens grew in the background, so I ran to the car and peered inside. What was left of Paulie was charred and smoking in the seat. The steering wheel had melted and was covered in dripping red and black, one of Paulie's hands now a permanent part of it. I glanced down at the tires and saw that they too were gone, little more than black goop that puddled on the pockmarked street.

No time left for finesse or rational thought, I reached my hands beneath the side of the car and grabbed ahold. Flames licked at my fingers and I felt my palms burn, but it couldn't be helped. My legs bunched beneath me, I rolled the Model-T over onto its side. It hit with a crash, shattered glass crunching beneath it. I shoved the car again, my hands smoking, blisters bubbling up. The T flipped, landing on its roof. Pieces of Paulie and Jimmy dripped down in long, wet streamers of red as I hit the T one last time, sending it sliding into the front wall of the club.

The wood creaked and I heard a few timbers crack, but the wall held. I saw the curtains go up inside the shattered windows, but I knew that wouldn't be enough as close as the police were. The wail of their sirens tickling my ears, they'd be able to put the fires out before it spread to the liquor. So, with desperation puckering me in unpleasant ways, I back up a few steps and charged at the T. I put my shoulder into it and felt my back twinge as I hit. My skull rang like a church bell, but I heard the wall give way.

The sharp snap of wood echoed through the night, burying the sirens for just a second as the steel frame of the T groaned and gave itself over to gravity. In an instant, the car disappeared, tumbling to the sound of thunder down the stairwell just beyond the front door of the club. It was so loud I almost didn't hear the screech of tires behind me.

My heart in my throat, I spun around to see another black Model-T, identical to Paulie's, jerk to a halt not twenty feet from where I stood. There weren't any markings,

and no sirens blared from it, so it had to be Bugs' guys. The driver was your standard goon; wide of forehead and thick across the jaw. I wouldn't have to worry about him until he hauled his bulk out of the seat and got his machine gun ready. His passenger though, was a different story.

Little more than a twig, the guy was out of the car before it even stopped rocking. He was almost completely bald, with little tufts of white hair floating above his ears like tiny clouds. His suit was two sizes too big for him, bunched at the elbows and ankles. It looked like a stiff wind could knock the guy over, but there was something threatening about him. His hands were empty, and though he didn't even seem to be carrying a gun, there was a threat in the dark green of his eyes.

Without even thinking about it, I let my senses loose. Invisible tendrils reached out, grasping for anything out of the ordinary. Even as dull as my senses were, they found *different* in spades. Of course, the shimmer of blue-green energy at his fingertips would have been obvious to a blind man.

I ducked and ran, slipping down a nearby alley as a burst of magical force ripped apart the street where I'd just been standing. My balls cradled in the well of my ass, I ran until I crossed the north-south line and then kept on, not stopping until I was sure I'd put some healthy distance between me and Bugs' boys. They didn't bother to follow.

Deep in the heart of Capone's territory, I finally slowed, taking a second to catch my breath before I headed home. While I'd done the job I'd been sent to do, I just knew Uncle Lou wasn't gonna be happy.

~

"Are you certain?" Lucifer asked, his voice a quiet rumble like a distant storm.

"The guy was a demon, I'm tellin' ya."

My uncle leaned back in his seat, his hand at his chin. While nothing of his thoughts

showed on the surface, I knew he was furious. There was a slight tremor in the earth that vibrated my chair. I fought the urge to go fetal and waited for him to decide what he wanted to do, knowing better than to rush him.

Though he didn't look like much, Lucifer didn't earn his reputation by appearing mean...he simply was. A few inches shorter than six feet and slim, but with a bit of a paunch, my uncle looked more grandfatherly than dastardly. He had gray hair that was cut fairly short, wisps of it sticking out like wings. There weren't any horns or hooves, or even red skin. He was kinda pasty actually, and could probably use a little sun. Wrinkled and covered in age spots, there wasn't anything about Lou that set him apart from the rest of humanity, until you looked him in his eyes.

It was like peering into an abyss of wickedness. The whole of the world's cruelty, its anger, its depravity, stared back at you when you locked gazes with my uncle. Every dark and sinister secret hidden from the light, every horror ever perpetrated on man, angel, or demon, was there to be seen, to be experienced in all its terrible grandeur. The first of the evil in the world, Lucifer was the epitome of it all, the entirety of it buried in his eyes. I looked away as the darkness churned in their depths.

"Did you recognize him?"

I shook my head. "I was too busy running for my life to bother checking if he was cute."

"Don't be vexsome, Triggaltheron." I could feel the weight of his stare on me, and simply nodded. At last I felt him turn his gaze away, the leather of his chair squeaking as he settled. Only then did I dare to look back. "It would seem Moran has found his own infernal assistance, though I can't imagine who would be so foolish as to interfere in my business."

Neither could I. While there was an unwritten rule that those of the Demonarch—the demon realm—were pretty much expected to wreak havoc where they could, there

wasn't a demon still breathing who didn't know better than to muck up Lucifer's plans. If the big guy was cooking, you stayed the Hell out of the kitchen if you weren't invited.

Lucifer sighed. "Go and rest, boy, and send Baalth in on your way. I've another job for you in the morning, and I want you healed, just in case."

I didn't waste any time. After I'd told my uncle's lieutenant the boss wanted to see him, I made my way to my room. The stink of gunpowder and charred meat still clung to me. I crawled into bed without bothering to wash. Since I didn't suspect I'd be getting screwed in any fun way in the morning, I didn't figure it mattered if I stank.

We'd all smell the same dead.

~

Morning came around early. We rolled down North Clark Street, me squeezed behind the wheel of the nice new Cadillac sedan Lucifer had rushed into town overnight, headed for the SMC Cartage warehouse. While I wasn't privy to all the details, I'd overheard some talk about Bugs and his demon flunky supposedly being there. Didn't take much imagination to realize this wasn't a social call. The shotgun Baalth was holding kinda helped.

The demon lieutenant sat in the back with two of my uncle's goons, another up front. Two of them were dressed like they were going to church, clean suits and ties, long jackets and nice hats, while Baalth and the last of them had on police uniforms. They all sat low in the seats, trying to be inconspicuous. There were too many unfriendly eyes on the street to be so transparent as to cover the rear windows. I'd just have to drive and hope for the best.

Before I could worry about it too much, we were there. I pulled into an alley that led to the rear of the warehouse and parked, leaving the engine running. Baalth smiled at me and stepped out, shotgun in hand, motioning for me to wait. The three demons slithered out as well. The one in the uniform carried a shotgun like Baalth, the other two

toted Tommy guns. Baalth led the way up a short ramp as a German Shepherd, tied to the bumper of an old truck in the parking lot, growled and barked at them. It knew what was coming, even if those inside didn't.

Baalth and the others slipped into the warehouse through the back door. Not five minutes later, after some muffled gunshots, the demon lieutenant and the other police-disguised demon came back outside, holding their shotguns on their own men, leading them at gunpoint back to the car.

That was my idea. If anyone had heard the shots and was peeking outside for a look-see, all they'd remember is two cops taking away a couple of suited malcontents. Misdirection at its finest.

Once inside the car, Baalth smiled at me. "Drive, Frank." In his free hand, he held a bloody cloth with something wrapped inside. It seemed to pulse.

I didn't hesitate, tearing out of the parking lot, the screech of tires drowning out the dog that howled at our backs. Once we were on the road and across the north-south line, Baalth opened the package and showed it to me. It was a heart, its beat winding down. It'd run too long to be human, so it had to be the demon's.

A squirt of blackened blood struck my arm at its final spasm, and I waved the thing away. "Happy Valentine's Day to you, too."

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