

THE
DEVIL'S
CODEx



SIDNEY REETZ

Hell Bat Publications

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Dedicated to *You*.
Others told me I got you wrong in the beginning
and for a bit, I thought I might have as well.
Thanks for proving me wrong.

To my mother, Dawn.
Thank you for giving me the strength
to believe in myself.

Thank you to:

Kira Shay, Meagan Vaughn and Will Minor
for their endless help and reading too many
versions of my manuscripts to count.

TJ Geisen for the phenomenal cover art.

I wouldn't have made it this far
without you guys!

“God had to have a counterpart, otherwise all the woes of humanity would have to be ascribed to him.”

“Yet if he [Lucifer] had been tempted, then temptation must have preexisted him, and therefore Evil did too. How could that be, since he was meant to be its inventor?”

- Gerald Messadie,
A History of the Devil

“For what is Truth? In matters of religion, it is simply the opinion that has survived.”

- Oscar Wilde

“Theology is a thing of unreason altogether, an edifice of assumptions and dreams, a superstructure without a substructure.”

- Ambrose Bierce

ANGELOLOGY

Angel Names

All angel names end in -el, a suffix meaning “of God.” Most (but not all) of the angels who fell during the battle in Heaven lost their original names. Thus they are known by their “demonic” names lacking in the -el suffix.

The Seven Archangels

Archangel is the term used for God’s “generals,” each in charge of one seventh of the Heavenly Host of angels. Most notable of these generals are: Michael, Gabriel, Raphael and Uriel. Each were elevated to their status from the Seraphim Choir. Prior to the war in Heaven, Lucifer was the eighth of these generals.

The Angel Hierarchy

Unless blessed with a particular purpose, all other angels fall into one of nine categories, each organized into three different levels or “spheres.” All angels classified in the first and second spheres only have one pair of wings.

The Third Sphere

Seraphim

The closest to God who carry His power in its most concentrated form. Their primary duty is to sing God's praises, to be his confidants and general inner circle. Seraphim means "fiery one" and each possesses six pairs of wings, the most of any angels.

Cherubim

Also called Cherubs. (But don't confuse those in this choir with baby Cupid.) They are Heavens Secret Service, the hit men, the assassins, the don't-fuck-with-me's. Each possesses not one, but four different faces: one of man, one of ox, one of eagle and one of lion. Each Cherubim possesses four pairs of wings.

Thrones

Thrones are angels who have a wheel shaped form, covered in a thousand eyes and wreathed in Heavenly Fire. Though in their wheel form they do not embody wings; it is rumored they possess two pairs.

The Second Sphere

Dominions

Dominions are charged with the task of supervising the angels below them and handing out assignments. They are distinguished from the other choirs by the orbs of light they wield.

Virtues

These angels are responsible for

working worldly miracles and events such as natural disasters, famine or draught. They are also tasked with ensuring the cosmos remain in order.

Powers

Angels of the Powers choir are responsible for keeping the powers of evil at bay. They are one of the warrior choirs and it is believed that none of the Powers fell from Heaven during the Fall.

The First Sphere

Principalities

These are angels who protect cities and nations as well as the leaders of religious faiths on Earth. They are the educators and keepers of histories.

Archangels

God's messengers who deliver divine decrees to Earth. (Not to be confused with the seven Archangel generals.)

Guardian Angels

The lowest ranking of all angels. They serve closest to human kind, carrying prays and acting as protectors, reporting good and bad deeds to their superiors in Heaven.

Demons

Demons are a class of Fallen Angels who have lost all spiritual humanity and have become corrupted throughout the ages or via their deeds. Some Fallen Angels manage to hold onto their angelic nature, but those who do not become the very monsters humans

have painted them to be.

Demons come in all shapes, sizes and forms and are most often policed by other Fallen Angels.

The Watchers

The last choir of angels created by God after the Fall. This choir was created outside of the angelic hierarchy and therefore does not fall into any of the three spheres.

They were created to blend in with human kind, to be guides and advisors, but also to be hidden assassins for the Fallen Angels. However, they blended in too well with the humans forming intimate bonds with them and even procreating. The offspring of these human/angel pairings were known as the Nephilim and were what caused God to send the Flood.

However, not all of the Watchers died. Sentenced to death by Heaven and natural enemies with Hell, they have been killed on sight ever since the Flood. Slowly, throughout the millennia, their choir has been brought to the brink of extinction.

Wards

Angelic “spells.” Written in the language of the angels, they appear as intricate glyphs carved out of light that can only be seen with inhuman sight.

CHAPTER ONE

THE ROAD TO HELL IS PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS

I grit my teeth and braced for the pain, not that it ever did a lick of good. Prepare all you want, pain will forever be brutal and ugly. Cursing in every language I knew, I jerked the blade protruding from my back free and slammed it down into the sink before me.

The clattering sound of the holy dagger sliding into the bowl was an offbeat to the dialogue blaring from the TV on other side of the hotel room.

“—and in other news today, the terrorist organization of the Sea Shepherd and its crew have finally been taken into custody. Viewers might remember this group from the Animal Planet television series *Whale Wars*, chronicling the group’s quest to save whales from Japanese fishing vessels. However, after an unconfirmed incident two months ago the crew’s peaceful intentions and controversial tactics dramatically shifted. After taking one vessel hostage, members of the Shepherds crew began murdering the captive fishermen and painted the words, ‘Save the whales or die’ in blood across the deck. As of yet—”

I didn't bother to stifle my aggravated snarl as I reached for one of the pristine, white towels hanging to my left. With a snap of my fingers the channel on the television instantly switched.

Another news anchor reported, "In Dallas, Texas this week the entire Sunny Valley Animal Shelter had to be quarantined after the outbreak of a new, unnamed, virus. Nearly all of the animals have had to be euthanized. Though the virus does not seem to transfer to humans, if you have adopted an animal from this shelter in the last two weeks, county authorities request you take your pet, and any other pets in your home, to the nearest emergency veterinarian's office as soon as possible."

Holding the towel against the wound, I fumbled with my free hand for the container of honey I had room service deliver only moments before. (Let the staff think what they wanted of that request.) I gripped the damned little bear shaped bottle between my teeth and ripped the head off with my fangs.

Pulling the towel, now dampened with my blood, away from the wound, I crushed half the contents of the decapitated bottle onto it.

"Serves you right, Luce," I muttered to myself as I did so. "You deserve an assassin's blade in the back. Just be grateful he didn't hit anything vital." I glanced up at my reflection in the mirror and scolded myself, "You should have killed him instead of letting him go. What were you *thinking*?"

Somewhere in the pain numbed regions of my mind, I was noting the irony of a knife in the back before I pressed the honey against the wound.

Too many times to count I had witnessed soldiers on every conceivable battle field cauterize

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injuries with fire. Honey was the angel equivalent of that; a magical cure all that felt worse than the initial injury. Preferably though, I would have taken a burning piece of iron against my bare flesh.

All words escaped me as I locked my hand in place and held what felt like molten lava against my back. I felt my fangs pierce my lower lip as I gasped through the agony, steam rising up from the towel as the flesh slowly, oh so slowly, began to knit itself back together.

Dimly, I heard the beep of an emergency news story breaking in. “Reports are still coming in, Carrie,” an overly dramatic woman’s voice called from the heart of the hotel room, “but it seems that a suicide bomber has just destroyed the Make-A-Wish Foundation’s headquarters building earlier this afternoon—”

Groaning and bracing myself against the sink, I lifted my free hand weakly and with a minor force of will, turned the volume of the TV down. Leaning there in the small bathroom, I concentrated on breathing as the steam began to die away from the towel. Once it did, I rolled the destroyed fabric into a ball. I would dispose of it properly later. Angelic blood wasn’t something you just tossed into a trash can. Hell only knew what would happen if it fell into the wrong hands.

Reaching back, I prodded the closed, yet still tender, wound. I’d been lucky; which either meant I was slipping when it came to my safety or Heaven was getting better in their attempts to kill me. My bruised ego wanted to say the latter, but I knew better.

I stood there, the news stories spinning through my mind, and absently wondered where I had gone wrong when I had decided to start this whole mess.

The idea had been a simple one: do good things,

redeem my name and cleanse my karmic debt. Then maybe, just maybe, I'd have a shot at going home, at being with my family and Father once more, of being loved and not feared. Just like things used to be.

A simple idea indeed until - well the news reports explained it all. Any operation of charity or goodness I happened to put my toe into instantly became tainted, internally corrupt or just had really horrible luck. I couldn't even bring myself to think about the last time I tried to volunteer at a soup kitchen. (Really, don't even ask.)

With a sigh, I reached up to brush my hair back out of my face. I glared at my own reflection with pure loathing.

"Stop stalling, you coward," I muttered to myself.

Reaching down, I grasped the edge of the t-shirt I was wearing and pulled it over my head one handed. Balling the fabric, with its knife slash and blood stains (not all of it mine), I tossed it onto the counter with the towel. Turning my back, I glanced over my shoulder at my reflection to see just how much worse the true damage to my soul had gotten.

Once upon a time, I'd been born into the Seraphim Choir of angels and later advanced to one of the coveted Archangel positions. One of the blessings of that noble rank, or requirements depending on your view, was bearing not one pair of wings, but six. Upon their ascension, each Archangel was branded with a tattoo spanning their entire back depicting those six pairs of wings. We were the only angels who were branded in such a manner, for it took our Father's touch to allow our skin to accept any design.

After the battle in Heaven and my ensued exile,

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I had been shocked to discover that every one of my white feathers upon those inked wings, had the tell-tale sign of a blackness slowly spreading to cover them. Over the eons, the “taint,” as I referred to it, had claimed nearly all of what I had formerly been.

Reaching a hand back, I traced the outline of the last three white feathers on the bottom right wing. Two years ago, I had nearly double the amount free of the taint. It only served as a personal reminder that there was never any telling how quickly or slowly it might spread.

If things didn't change soon, or if I didn't find a way to regain the favors of Heaven, the blackness would soon cover those three remaining bits of hope. If that happened, I feared that I would truly be lost to the darkness which everyone assumed I'd already succumbed to during the Fall.

Looking more closely at one of the feathers, I could see the tip of the highest one was darker than the remaining two. Like an infection spreading, the taint was starting to take it from me.

Though the physical manifestation of my wings were dismissed, as my fingers trailed over the tattoo on my back I could feel a tangible touch on my hidden appendages. The sensation sent a sickening, oil coated feeling down my spine as I drew my hand away.

“We have got a problem here, Lucifer,” I muttered darkly to my own blue eyed reflection.

I had no evidence to support my theory, but something in my soul was telling me that if every one of my wings blackened completely, I would lose the last of my angelic nature. I would lose who I was. Indeed, I felt more and more of my essence slipping away as the dark tumor proliferated over the last few centuries. If it were to consume me, would every vile thing I suppressed and

fought within myself be set free?

Belief is the power source of the universe, and no one's reputation had fared worse than my own since the dawn of creation. My name has become a vile word, a curse, whispered only out of fear or hatred. False stories are rampant with tales of possessions by me and temptations I never offered. Even a cult of humans had erected a religion around my name, performing pagan rites and rituals that have only degraded my status further.

It was a course of destruction I had no correction for. After all, how were you to stop an idea from spreading like the plague when it was backed by religious fanaticism?

How could I explain that I had only done what I was forced to do by the deity that had given me life? A deity that had blessed me with a freedom of will, but whom had declared my kind could never disobey His direct orders.

I guess that was where the misconception that we angels have no free will came from. Because, really, how could there have been a battle in Heaven if we didn't have free will?

Unless, He wanted a war in the first place.

The sound of shattering glass broke me out of my mental wandering.

Shocked, I pushed myself away from the bathroom vanity as the shattered mirror rained down around me in a cacophony of destruction. With my boots crunching over the debris, I numbly looked down at my throbbing fist. Blood and broken bits of glass were smeared and imbedded across it.

It was no secret that I had a temper; but this . . . What kept me there staring at my bleeding fist was not

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the fact that I had done it - but the missing direction in my brain that had told my hand to act.

I didn't even realize I'd been standing there in the remains of the bathroom for a couple of hours until the hotel rooms TV started up with the afternoon news report. Hadn't I also turned the volume off? When had I—

What was happening to me?

“The latest survey is just in this morning,” the anchor reported cheerfully, “ranking Lost Port, California as the nation's number one city in crime, murder, car theft, poverty, unemployment, home invasions and divorce. These numbers have steadily been on the rise for the last five years. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Lost Port has just been dubbed as the Deadliest City in the US and nicknamed ‘The Devil's Playground’.”

Ignoring the pain in my back and hand, I leaned my head out of the bathroom to look at the broadcast as it faded into a human interest story.

That was when, for fate or ruin, the idea came to me.

Going over to my duffle bag on the bed, I rummaged until I found a fresh shirt at the bottom and pulled it out. Next I stuffed the blood soaked shirt, towel and dagger into it. A short trip back to the bathroom and I had the blood smeared bits of glass in it as well. The whole thing would be burned to ash in the first incinerator I could find.

The cuts on my fist were shallow enough that they were already healing on their own. Pulling the shirt on, I clicked the television off with another thread of will. I tried not to wince at the pain in my back as I slung the bag over my shoulder and headed for the door.

Sidney Reetz

If there was anything that could earn me back at least one of my wings, it was turning a city like Lost Port into one of the holiest places on Earth. After all, it was already the vilest city on the continent. How much worse could I make it?

CHAPTER TWO

FOOLS RUSH IN WHERE ANGELS FEAR TO TREAD

The teenage girl sitting on the front step of the narrow, three story house should have been my first sign to get out of the city.

She was dressed as a goth, with six inch platform boots that would have put her at only a mere five foot eight if she were standing. Her legs were encased in red and black striped stockings that ended at the hem of a black skirt which had chains embroidering the edges instead of lace. I couldn't see the name of the band on the shirt she wore but the murderous glare she was giving me said it was probably something out of the punk or metal genre. With hair dyed as black as a ravens wing, her pale face was stark white and accented the blood red lipstick she'd applied. Maybe she was trying to go for some sort of undead Snow White look.

Kids like her always made me think of good old Lazarus from back in the day. Now, if they were to see what a true undead looked like I'm sure Hot Topic would have been out of business within a month.

Parked at the curb, I sat on my motorcycle tilting

my head at her for a moment before I looked down at the scrap of paper in my hand once more. Glancing back up at the address to the home she was sitting in front of, I was somewhat disappointed to see I had the right place.

The house was just as run down as the rest of the residential block it was embroiled with. Smashed wall to wall with the homes on either side of it, the place was three stories of tight and tiny. The city's grime and pollution hadn't boded well for the façade of the place, leaving me to wonder if the paint had originally been green or if the place had somehow started to mold. There were still splotches of the original white trim, but it had faded to a sickly looking cream and, in some places, to dingy yellow.

There were bars on the first story windows and every set of cheap, blinds were shut tight against the pleasant afternoon breeze coming in from the ocean. Looking around at the other homes with their open windows, it struck me as odd, but then humans were odd to begin with.

Leaving my duffle bag in the side car of my WWII motorcycle, I dismounted and shoved the scrap of newspaper clipping into the pocket of my black bomber jacket.

A small gate surrounded the dime sized front 'lawn' of the house. I had to step around three seasonal pumpkins, brightly painted and depicting classic jack-o-lantern faces as I opened the gate. Some dormant part of my mind took intimate note of this as I passed but it was quickly forgotten as the goth's eyes lifted to me.

The two little ear phones stuffed into her ear canals were to blame for that delay, I noted. Without warning, she lifted her chin and hissed at me, showing off a pair of pearl white fangs!

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Stupid, stupid me, I actually jumped away from her.

“Be gon, pa-ffetic mor-tal!” she snarled, the fake fangs shoved over her canines making her lisp like a bad B movie actress. “Or ay’ll sick da hounds upon yee.”

I stood at the bottom of the stairs doing my best to recover my initial pansy-assedness, I pointed to her right boot and half of her leg, which were in direct sunlight. “Yo, Bela Lugosi, better get your foot out of the sun before it burns off.”

The girl hissed at me again, scrambling up another step and into the full shade of the porch’s overhang. It was in her movements that I noticed her left arm was encased in a cast. She’d colored it in with black and red Sharpie markers to match her stockings. Or hide it, I wasn’t sure which.

Playing along with her, I nodded at the cast. “Aren’t your kind supposed to heal instantly?”

“Be gon, pa-ffectic—” She growled, pulling out her fake set of fangs with her uninjured hand. “Get out of here, jerk, before I call the cops. You are trespassing. I swear you put one boot on that step and I’ll Kung-Fu: The Legend Continues your ass down to Maple Street.” She shoved her fangs back into her mouth and hissed again.

I held up one hand as I pulled out the scrap of newspaper from my pocket. “I’m here about the room for rent. You live here? Is your father home?”

Her eyes narrowed at me, her mouth stretching with a frown until the tips of her fangs started to pierce her lower lip. “My dad is dead,” she stated coldly.

“Uhh, your mother then? Or, shall I rephrase that and say, ‘Take me to your leader?’”

She did what all teenage girls do; she rolled her

eyes at me before overdramatically pushing herself to her feet. Opening the front door, she stuck her head inside the house and yelled as if her voice box were a stadium PA system, “MOM! THERE’S A STRIPPER AT THE FRONT DOOR!”

I tried not to jump. Honestly, I tried. Let it never be said that the Lord of all evil had nerves of steel.

Stripper? I looked down at myself. I’d seen a lot worse at the local mall when I’d scoped out the city upon my arrival.

“It’s your pretty boy face,” the girl lisped as she turned back to me.

There was that vile word again. Why did everyone have to refer to me as ‘pretty?’ It has *never* been a masculine word. In fact, it very much degrades all forms of masculinity.

She gave me a scathing once over, turning her nose up as she solidified her opinion of me in that one move. Her judgmental demeanor was simple enough to read: I was the peasant to her princess. “No one as good looking as you stays here in Lost Port without being something fishy. Did you get kicked out of Hollywood?”

“No,” I said sharply.

“Porn studio?”

I glared at her.

Still, I shouldn’t have been complaining. At least she wasn’t throwing herself at me like most human females did. It was hit or miss, but some of the younger ones were immune to me.

Thanks to the Bible, every human has heard the story about how I was the ‘fairest of all God’s creations.’ Then there was that bit about the temptation and the seduction of evil. What few realize, and what my Father realized too late, was that perfection is actually a flaw.

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Being the most beautiful anything instantly puts you on a hit list by, well, everyone else. It either means they want to take you down a few notches to make themselves feel better or they just want to possess you (or be possessed by you) to feel better about themselves. Rarely do I ever find a middle ground between the two.

“What was that, Cindy?” A mature woman’s voice called from inside the house.

The goth girl suddenly turned as red as her drug store bought lipstick. “I stopped answering to my slave name last week, Mom. I told you, it’s Syn now! Syn!”

Through the screen door with the construction paper bats taped to it, I could see a motherly figure walk into the light. She had a dishcloth in her hands, rubbing something from her palms as she peered out at me over her circular glasses. All in all, she was the picture of what any middle income, American housewife was this century.

“Cindy, you left the door open again. How many times do I have to tell you to— Oh, h-hello, sir,” the motherly one said spotting me. “Can I help you?”

She stuffed the towel in the front pocket of the apron she wore about her waist, her hands flying up to self-consciously smooth down her blonde hair. The action only brought to my attention the blush spreading across her cheeks as she took me in. A subtle shift in her posture and a slight dilation of her dark eyes told me she was far from immune to me.

Great.

Oblivious, Syn scoffed and shoved one of her iPods head phones into her ear. “He was lost. I told him how to get to the Circle K down the street. Now he won’t leave. Let’s call the cops.”

“Actually,” I said, pulling out and displaying the

newspaper clipping in my hand, “I read about your room for rent. Could we speak, Mrs . . . ?”

The mothers blush paled slightly as her welcoming persona seemed to falter at my words. “Actually, it’s Ms. But you can just call me Ruby Moon. Ruby for short.” Her eyes moved to the clipping in my hand. “What, might I ask, drew you to my ad?” There was a note of suspicion in her voice I couldn’t help but pick up on. It was subtle, but being trained in music and voices as I was, I picked the emotion out easily.

I made a show of looking up at the older house and half smirking to myself. “When I drove past to take a look, it reminded me of the home I grew up in. Plus it’s not far from my - office downtown.”

Ruby followed my gaze up to the slowly decaying house, her brows furrowed with half belief at my words.

Smiling sadly, I held up my hands in a defeated gesture. “You know, maybe this was a bad idea. I have another appointment to meet with the landlord of a townhouse a few more miles outside of town. I’ll just—” Turning my back on her, I started to head towards my bike.

“Good riddance,” I heard Syn huff.

That was when I caught a faint, stray thought from the mother pinging against my telepathy. Curious, I tuned into it. *Ruby, stop being sexist towards every man you come in contact with. He is not Marshall. Can’t you see you’re being a poor role model to your daughter?*

“Wait,” she called out to me.

I stopped at the edge of the property, dusted with fall leaves, and turned back to her.

“Please, come inside. Let’s at least talk.” She held the door open for me when I started back towards

her. To her daughter she said, “Cindy, go find your sister, dear, and keep her out of trouble as I entertain our guest. She was playing in her toy box, last I saw.”

One of Syn’s eyes twitched. “*Whut-ever*, Mother. I told you, Cindy is a slave name. Every time you call me that you order me to do something.” At her mother’s glare, she stomped one of her boots on the porch before marching inside to do exactly as she was told. “Ugh! Life is so unfair!”

Ruby pulled her towel out again and gestured for me to follow her into the house. “Children,” she sighed in an apologetic tone. “Do you have any, Mr . . . I’m so sorry; I didn’t ask your name.”

“John. John Milton to be exact,” I supplied, giving her the false identity I’d been using for some time now. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Moon. And no, I don’t have any children.”

The living room I entered into would have made a Spartan soldier proud. The furniture was sparse, only a worn couch, coffee table, a book shelf, and a small television set filled the space. Though it was bleak in décor, every inch was spotless. To me, that spoke of having little but valuing much.

“Be grateful for that,” Ruby laughed. “They are a handful.” She turned to me suddenly and raised her hand to mockingly whisper, “At least the first ones seem to be. My second is as sweet as an angel.”

Her laugh was just what I’d expect from a good matronly woman, polite but full of joyful mirth. Every inch of her screamed that she was a good, pure soul. Which only put me more on edge. What was someone like her doing in such a depraved city like this?

As if that thought keyed my senses to take a better look at her, I noted that Ruby was staying a

continuous five feet away from me as we walked, which was well out of arms reach. She'd also instantly sent her daughter away. It sounded as if she wanted Syn to keep a second daughter occupied and out of my sight. Granted, being just shy of seven feet tall, I was an intimidating stranger but that wasn't the feel I was getting as I followed her.

Ruby showed me into the small kitchen just past the living room. Being the narrow house it was, the spaces were small and the doorways even smaller. As broad shouldered as I am, I had to turn slightly to get through.

Looking around, I noted the kitchen had the same sparse décor as the other room. A small wobbly kitchen table, a reused microwave probably from a local Goodwill, and a fridge that was probably on its last legs.

Suddenly, the reasoning for Ruby and her family being here in Lost Port made perfect sense. With her husband dead and two kids to support, she was barely scraping by, which had to be why the ad had been in the paper.

"It's not the Holiday Inn," Ruby said by way of apology. "Coffee? Tea? Soda?"

She went to the kitchen table and pulled out a chair for me. I took it but sat gingerly. I felt as if I'd break the flimsy thing in half.

"Water, please?"

Setting a cup down before me a moment later, Ruby filled the chair opposite and folded her hands on the table. She proceeded to tell me about her requirements for renting from her, the do's and don'ts which were pretty much 'no, duh' stuff as far as I was concerned. She explained that the room on the first floor (which was half sunk into the ground and more like a

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basement) lacked its own bathroom, so I'd have to share with Syn on the second floor. After stating that I was alright with that, Ruby then lead me down to view the space.

As we moved down a hidden set of stairs adjacent to the kitchen, another telepathic ping registered in my mind. *Lucifer, Lord of the Shadows, Master of all that is Vile*, a demon's hissing voice raced to fill my mind before I could "hang up" on the call. *I seek an audience to make a pact of blood for-*

Not now! I bellowed back over the connection. *Can't you see I'm about to sign a lease?*

Wh-what? I heard before snapping the line like a kite string.

Damn demons always wanting something at the most inconvenient times. It was probably a sign that I needed to get back to my duties in Hell though. I hadn't been away long, but things there were unpredictable at best.

At the bottom of the steps, Ruby was looking up at me with concern written on her features. "Everything alright, John?"

Shaking my head and mentally putting a block on all incoming telepathic lines, I nodded. "Yeah, just felt a little light headed for a second. So, this is the place, huh?"

It was a typical room with four walls and - that was pretty much it. There was a small window near the ceiling looking out towards the street but some sort of foliage outside was covering most of the light that came in. I could instantly see why the place hadn't gotten rented out prior to my arrival. With no ceiling fan and a window that couldn't open, the twelve by twelve room was hot and stuffy; which I was perfectly fine with.

After spending time in Hell it was like a freaking luxury day spa.

“Everything looks good to me,” I said to Ruby after we came out of the hidden stairs in the kitchen leading down to the room. “Would you need the first and last month’s deposit upfront?”

Ruby looked at me in a disbelieving manner. “You mean you want it? The last two girls who came here took one look and left as fast as their high heels could take them.”

I shrugged and tried to put on a friendly face. “I’m a man of simple taste. I don’t need much. Just four walls and roof over my head.”

“I see.” But by the way she was tugging at her lower lip with her teeth; I could tell there was something else. She caught me looking down at her and blushed a brighter red than when she’d come to the front door. Slowly, I edged back to put another two feet between us. “I - Well, I will admit that I was hoping to rent the room out to a woman and not a . . . man,” she said, shame coloring her voice. “I know, I know, I should have put that on the article but- It’s just that I have two very young girls and—”

I stopped her with a gentle lift of my hand. “You don’t need to explain. I completely understand. You should never be ashamed of trying to be a good mother to your children, Ms. Moon. In a city like this, you have every reason to be hesitant about welcoming a man into your home, let alone ever consider allowing him to live with you.”

She nodded, her eyes not wanting to focus on me and instead flittering around the kitchen and out towards the living room. I didn’t have to read her mind to know what she was thinking. She needed the money I

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could pay her and no one else wanted the room.

How does the human phrase go about light bulb's clicking on over people's heads when they have an idea? Whatever it is, I saw it clearly appear on Ruby's face. She promptly looked me directly in the eyes, a daring feat for most humans, and said, "Alright. But before I agree to rent out to you, Mr. Milton, there is a test that needs to be performed."

I very nearly stumbled over my own feet. "Test? What kind of test? Look if you need me to pee in a cup, I'm—"

"No, no, nothing like that," Ruby said with a fresher blush to her cheeks. "I have methods that are much more accurate than any doctor's."

She quickly moved to one of the overhead cabinets in the kitchen. Pulling down a small wooden box, she came back to the dinner table and set it in the center. As soon as she removed the box from the cabinet, my senses had tuned into the gentle thrum of power emanating from within it. That thread of power only seemed to grow as Ruby touched the box, as if she were awakening what was held within via the contact.

I moved slowly to the table and reclaimed my prior seat with the practiced ease of caution. "I can give you references, if that is what you'd like."

"These are all the references I need." Ruby opened the box and pulled out something wrapped in a dark blue cloth. As her hands moved over the bundle, I could hear the surge of power like another heart beat awakening in the room with us.

Unfolding the cloth, I saw Ruby unwrap - a deck of Tarot cards.

Being somewhat of an expert on old things, I could see right off the bat that these were indeed *old* by

human standards. The evident wear and faded coloring easily attested to that, but aged air of a relic that clung to the deck spoke of something that contained destiny.

The hum of power settled to a controlled drum beat as my host caressed the cards, fanning them out before molding them into a deck again and setting them down.

Ruby must have seen my face. “It’s alright. You don’t have to believe.” Winking at me, she mocking whispered once more, saying, “Don’t laugh, but a touch of the gift has been with my family since they came from the old country.”

I wasn’t laughing. I was ready to run for the door as I looked down at those innocent looking cards.

Ruby herself wasn’t much of a talent with the mystic arts; I would have sensed it within her by now. I’d been in the house speaking with her for nearly an hour with none of my senses picking up any traces of power from her. For crying out loud, her thoughts were not even shielded, which was the first trick any talented human picked up on.

No, I had the feeling whatever skills she thought she had truly came from that deck of cards.

“You don’t say. What kind of - gift?”

I sat stiffly on the chair, watching the cards before me as if they might come to life and try to take a bite out of me. Being birthed from a particular religion, well, let me just say that angels and rituals from other religions didn’t play well in the sandbox of the universe together.

I couldn’t say what would happen if Ruby tried to divine something about me. Knowing my luck, a volcano would erupt somewhere or an F6 category tornado would finally be discovered.

THE DEVIL'S CODEX

“Oh, just a little of this and a little of that. This deck was passed down to me from my mother and her mother before her. We’ve lost track of exactly how far it goes back but I tell you, these boys here are never wrong. Don’t worry; I have a good feeling about you, John. I’m just checking because, well, my daughters have—” she gave a small sigh. “I’ve made mistakes in the past that have cost them dearly.”

And with those words, all of my trepidation about the situation vanished. Her daughters. Of course, she was using whatever tools she thought of as her best weapons to protect her young. (No matter how obscure those weapons might be.)

I braced my arms on the table and gestured for her to begin.

Divination for the Devil, well now this was going to be a first.