

GODFELLAS, OR, VIC TAKES A ROOM AT THE MAGELLAN

an original short story by Rachel Caine

I suppose you might say I died happy. Couple bottles of gin, a hooker who looked exactly like Julia Roberts, and one cigarette too many. See, I was laying there in the afterglow, lighting up, not paying any attention, when the door opened and Jimmy Cassoli came in with his two ugly cousins and put a couple of .375 hollow points through my forehead.

Didn't hurt as much as I thought it would – big noise, big flash of light, and then it was all over but the crying. That was the hooker crying, 'cause she had to get the hell out of the room without her best pair of fuck-me shoes. Jimmy Cassoli must have known her or something because he didn't pop her on the way out, or maybe he was just more interested in making sure I wasn't going to get up and follow her.

While they were going through my wallet for the green and grabbing up my working gun – I really hated that, I loved that .45 – I realized I wasn't actually laying there looking up at them anymore. I was standing next to them, but it was like *I wasn't* standing there, because they didn't see me. I took a swing at Cassoli, who was yucking it up how I'd pissed the bed, but it didn't connect. I kept trying, though; nobody screws with Vic Donato like that without paying for it.

Except maybe Jimmy Cassoli, who slapped his cousins on the back and took them down the stairs, out for an evening of lasagna and big-man bragging. I was left standing there, fists ready and nobody to slam them into except that poor bastard on the bed, who I then realized might really be me.

I had to sit down. See, that guy on the bed that looked like me wasn't dead yet. Going, you know, but not gone. Blood kept pumping, lungs kept filling, eyes kept staring straight up. *Die*, I kept thinking, like I was the hitter, not the hittee. Only the guy on the bed didn't die, not then. Not that quick. Took another fifteen minutes for the cops to show up, guns drawn, take a look at him -- me -- laid out bleeding into the bed, and call for an ambo.

So for the next twenty minutes or so firemen, cops, paramedics, goddamn Boy Scout trooped around my fucked-up near corpse like ants around a picnic. Hell, I was the biggest tourist attraction since Father Carmine Ozowski hung himself from the sprinkler head while wearing a black leather teddy. Speaking of priests, one of the cops – Billy Torreti, we'd been altar boys together – came up with one, dragged his drunk holy ass out of some other shithole room, I guess, 'cause I remember Billy propping the Father up while he made the sign of the cross and gave me unction. At which point, I started shaking all over and leaking brains out of the great big hole in the back of my head.

I felt it, that exact second when the guy on the bed ceased to be me and started being a decomposing pile of meat. I felt it, but nothing happened. I didn't zip off to heaven, or hell, or into the light with my dead friends.

Nothing.

Happened. Not to me.

Eventually, the room got sorted out. Coroner carted out my smoking corpse, trailing cops and crying hookers like a Saint Paddy's day parade. I was already forgotten by everybody except the maid, who was going to have to wipe soot off the walls and put in a new air freshener. Baddabing, badda boom.

Game over.

I had no idea what the hell I was supposed to do. Hanging around staring at the bloody mattress sounded sick, but for the first time in my life I had no place to go. Nobody to see. Nobody to do.

Then this guy walked into the room. Just a guy, on the skinny side, medium everything. He didn't look like much of nothing, but unlike all the other mopes, he wasn't looking at the bed. He was looking straight at me, giving me big puppy eyes, and I was feeling just a little bit pissed off, so I snarled, "What the hell you looking at, pinhead?"

"I don't know, Vic. What am I looking at?" He had a medium voice, too. Some kind of Midwest accent. He sounded mild and a little bit cocky, which pissed me off more.

I was about to tell him to fuck off when I noticed the wings. I'm talking real wings, sort of like a fan of white light, so bright it should have set the dingy peeling paint on fire. Apart from the wings, he still looked like the kind who ordered vanilla at 31 Flavors, which was crazy, right? How could he be an angel? Angels were sexy babes in sheer robes and little fluffy wings, like Victoria's Secret models

I checked behind me. No wings.

"Not yet," the angel said, like he was listening to my head. "First, you have a few things to take care of."

Great. I couldn't even go to hell without owing some asshole a favor. All of a sudden I felt tired, really tired, tired of everything. My life had been one piece of bullshit piled on top of another. A giant mountain of crap, and I'd been the king of the dungheap. Big Vic Donato.

So what the hell? Might as well screw up my afterlife, too.

"Shoot," I said. He winced and looked at the bed. "You know what I mean."

I had some debts to work out. Of course. Which meant I had some time to serve, a cross between juvie detention and a Federal pen.

My sentence was two more years stuck inside the fucking Magellan.

Which just goes to prove, the more things change ...

Two years later, on the last day of detention (say hallelujah), I sat on a plastic avocado-green couch in the Magellan's lobby and stared at the desk clerk, who was reading a thick paperback. He was new, I noticed. I kept an eye out for that sort of thing around here.

"Hey," I said. The desk clerk glanced up at me, waved vaguely, and went back to moving his lips. "Hey! Buddy!"

"Yeah?" He didn't even look up this time.

"You ought to get a better job. This one's bad for your health." If he was an innocent asshole working the night shift, a little intimidation could save his life. Of course, if he was a genuine innocent asshole, he couldn't have heard me ask the question, 'cause, of course, I was dead, and therefore that would be kinda hard.

He finally looked up from his book.

"Look," he said. "It's your last day, right? Give it a rest. We can call this one a draw, you know, in honor of your big day and all."

"My ass."

"Shit. Well, whatever you want," he shrugged. "Just figured you'd want to get to that sunny afterlife sooner instead of later."

"I will," I said, and spread my arms out over the back of the couch. Genuine antique, that couch. Nobody had so much as wiped it off since 1969. I figured the lobby carpet for shag, too, but who could tell under all the grime. "Soon as we're done. How's life on the wrong side of the tracks?"

He shrugged again and opened his book like he might just go back to it. "It's okay. Tell the truth, that singing Hosannah In The Highest, that ain't all it's cracked up to be, is it?"

"Like sleeping with your sister." He grinned, so I clarified it. "No, I mean *your* sister. Man, she was good."

No more grin. He put the book away. "You don't want to mess with me, you stupid fuck. You really don't."

"Yeah, and you'd be who, exactly?"

"Nobody you want to mess with." I might not have been a big thinker, but I could see that this little conversation was going nowhere. It was time to quit talking.

I sized him up. Nothing special about this punk except for two nose rings and one in his lip like a pull-tab. Of course, looks weren't everything.

Take me, for instance. I wasn't much to write home about, either.

We dick-measured for a while without saying anything.

"I can see we're going to need to get this part out of the way," he said. "This is the door to Hell. I guard the door to Hell. So I think you'd better walk out and go cry on Saint Pete's shoulder or whoever's God's doorman this week, and save your ass, 'cause otherwise I'm going to fry it like the Colonel's chicken, baby."

I gave him the universal Italian goodwill gesture.

"You're kind of a stupid fucker, aren't you?" he asked, with a certain degree of admiration. I sighed.

"Okay, that's it. I'm gonna come over there and play pop your weasel." He looked confused. I gave him the short version. "You want a piece of me, go right ahead. I ain't leaving."

He smiled like he had a double-barreled shotgun aimed at me under the counter, only I had the feeling what he had in store for me was nowhere near as warm and fuzzy as that. "Duuuude," he said – he had that half-dead surfer look – "Thanks. As a matter of fact, I am *so* hungry."

And then he turned. Not a pretty sight. Some of these scumbags, they look nearly human – at least as nearly human as they ever did. He wasn't that pretty. Tumors, tentacles and a big drool problem.

And teeth. They *always* had teeth.

"Nice outfit," I said. "Your mommy get it for you?"

"Your soul is mine," he hissed, and sort of oozed through the counter. Christ in a can, you'd think word would get around or something, that trick was older than Methuselah, David Fucking Copperfield could do it. I shrugged and metabolized a nice big silver cross. Very B-movie. I seriously missed having the heavy artillery, like a chrome .45 or a nice handful of Uzi, but more than just the times had changed. Besides, an Uzi would have just given this pencil dick a bad case of acne.

He laughed and kept on coming. "Hey, douche brain, what makes you think I'm scared of your little cross?"

"Nothing," I said, and flipped it in the air, grabbed the long end, and threw it end-over-end. Somewhere between us, it turned red hot and developed a nice sharp point on it.

Oooh, that had to hurt. Plus, it ruined his loud Hawaiian shirt.

I figured he wanted to give me one last curse, but the cross was eating into him in a big way, and he was just plain too pissed to bother.

We got down to the serious dancing.

Messy. Very, very messy. When it was over, the Magellan was knee-deep indisincorporated Demon, and I was having a bitch of a time scraping dried ectoplasm off my plaid jacket. Not that it mattered. I was about to trade in my sports coat for something nice and heavenly, in a 36 Long.

"Nice job, Vic," said my supervisor, who was either some unpronounceable Angelic name or Ed, depending who you asked. He looked pretty comfy today, mostly human except for the big gaudy wings behind him. I used to ask him, why the wings? I'd never got that part. I mean, wasn't like we used 'em or anything. Typical angel, he'd never given me a straight-out answer, either.

Ed, who'd floated in through the front doors sometime while I was kicking the shit out of Surfer Demon, came in and levitated about three inches over a pool of bubbling slime. "You know, we really must discuss some ways to make this less – messy."

"You want the fucking place redecorated, hire Martha Stewart," I said. "I'm in the extermination business. Actually, I guess I just graduated out of the extermination business. Yippee." One of the dirty fluorescent lights was flickering overhead, it was giving me a headache. I took a pair of shades out of my pocket and slid them on.

"You know, you don't really need those."

"Go play with your harp, Ed."

Ed looked like I'd farted at God's dinner table. "I wish you'd—"

"Act more like an Angel. Yeah, we've been all over that. Well, excuse me, but the Big Guy picked me, he knew what the fuck he was getting into. He's all-knowing, right? So I got nothing to apologize for." I kicked a still-wiggling tentacle out of my way. "That's why you hired me on, buddy. Because I ain't *neat*."

"Actually, I recruited you because you had something we lack," he said softly. "Passion. So few souls die with such a sense of *life* and the importance of it. When you ascended—"

"—got whacked—"

"—you kept that passion. Most souls come to us at peace. Not you."

"No shit," I said. "I got my head blown off by a hollow point out of a .357, that really fucks up your best day. Look, can we skip the catechism and get right to the part where you bless me and get me the hell out of here?"

I was not in the mood for Ed's crap. I'd just smoked a Demon, probably the equivalent of a made guy in the Opposition, and as far as I was concerned it was just about Miller Time. I had done two years of hard time knocking down the bad guys, and it was time to get my reward.

I didn't like that look from Ed. That kind look. It gave me the creeps.

"Vic," he said gently. "I'm afraid we're not quite finished yet."

"Maybe you're not, but I am. Unless you want this rathole torched."

Hey, believe me, I was all in favor of splashing a little gas and holding a barbecue, but I was pretty sure that wasn't the Angelic Way. Preserve, protect, you know. The only fair game was the kind with horns, hooves and too many teeth.

"We can't do that." Ed looked pained.

"So you tell me."

"There are living people here."

As if she wanted to prove his point, a dazed, stoned, half-dead hooker wandered down the stairs and across the lobby in search of the Coke machine. For her the twitching piles of ex-Demon didn't exist. Neither did I. Neither did Ed. We wouldn't unless we dropped another level and put on skin, which all things considered was not in my plans. Not that I don't like it, it's just I got used to doing without it, you know?

The hooker tripped over a seam in the threadbare carpet. She could have been anywhere from thirteen to seventeen, but not around the eyes. She'd skipped all those years of braces and training bras and shy little kisses in the school halls; she'd hold up pretty good another couple of years and die with a needle in her arm, or a knife in her chest, or maybe just freeze her ass to death in an alley somewhere. Ed watched her with that quiet tender look he gets. I'd seen him give that same damn look to a five-year-old raped and strangled in a crackhouse. It was all just a matter of degree to him.

I didn't bother to get out of the hooker's way as she walked through me. She shivered a little, crossed

thin arms across her chest, and hurried on, head down. Probably thought it was just the shakes from coming down off her latest skin-pop.

In the old days, she would have been walking furniture to me, something you could buy and sell and lie down on to get comfortable. Maybe that's why I didn't put on skin anymore. I didn't like remembering.

"Why me?" I asked. I was watching the kid walk away now, staring her thousand-mile stare. "You never told me, why'd I end up here instead of *there*?"

I wasn't talking about the hooker, and Ed knew it. He raised eyebrows and gave me his calm look.

"Remember the priest giving you last rites and absolving you of your sins?" he asked. "We meant that."

"So Ted Bundy gets last rites and he earns a pair of wings, too. Great fucking system."

Ed's smile was a slice of mystery and ham. "Not all truths are true for all."

Which demonstrates why I tried not to ask too many questions.

"Translate this," I said, and shot him the finger. "Can we go now?"

"Not quite yet." Ed got that tender look again, only this time it was for my benefit. "Just a bit more."

"Yeah, how many more?" Truth was, I was tired, and I was pissed, because Ed could have at least hinted around that the last day was going to be busy. And plus, I'd just wasted my best trick.

"Just two more," he said, almost apologetically. I gave him a bug-eyed glare. "But I'm sure they won't cause you any trouble."

Not much, they wouldn't. Thing is, the whole reason I was here wearing the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval instead of sizzling my dick downstairs was that (1) I'd gotten absolved and I actually *had* been sorry, and (2) the Opposition (that was what Ed called them, the Opposition) were kicking angelic ass. When somebody like me came up eligible, well, it was like being an NFL first-round draft pick. Mopes like me were few and far between.

But that wasn't the case Down Under. Nearly everybody down there, including the punk kids, could kick the crap out of most anybody Up There. Which made my job just a little bit difficult.

No backup.

"Two more," I said. "Two more Demons. That doesn't include my buddy here?"

Ed glanced down at the slime on the floor, which had started out human, gone bad, and then gone worse, and mutely shook his head. I hadn't killed the little prick – in fact, *wecouldn't* kill each other, it was part of the rules of the game – but I'd hurt him bad. It would take him about, oh, two or three thousand years to pull himself together again, by which time, hopefully, the whole ball game might be tidily wrapped up. Of course, that could just as easily have been me bubbling in little puddles down there. Angels, Demons, there wasn't much difference when you got right down to it, except they went more for the chains, leather and horns look instead of the wings. Basically, Demons had better fashion sense. And they got the chicks.

"*Twomore* ," I said. "That right?"

Ed nodded. Which was not good news for me. Chances were that I'd end up just like my surfer buddy, disincorporated for long enough that mountains would disappear and, if I was lucky, disco might finally be dead.

"Shit," I snarled. Ed looked grave. "Let me just say this once: after tonight, I take a break. *Capische?* A nice, long break. Someplace with a beach, and I don't mean friggin' Jersey."

"Whatever you'd like," he said soothingly. I noticed he wasn't watching me anymore. He was watching the hooker.

She'd made it to the hallway and was punching buttons on the Coke machine. It clanked and clattered and died. I could feel her desperation all the way across the room.

Ed gave me one of those puppy looks.

"Fine. Let me take another one for the team," I said, and translated over to the Coke machine. Reached inside, wiggled metal things until a lukewarm can of cola rolled out for her. My good deed for the day.

"Fuck," she muttered, and picked up the can. "I wanted diet."

Which just went to show where good deeds got you. I translated back over to where Ed was drifting along and said, "She wanted diet. Let's go kill some demons."

"You know, we're not actually killing them, we're altering their aetheric—"

"Actually, Ed, I don't give a rat shit."

Upstairs was, well, Hell. Now you got to understand, this is not unusual. Hell exists in little cancerous pockets all over the place, it breaks out like syphilis wherever two or three Demons manage to stake a claim — you know, wherever two or three are gathered together ... Like the clap, it's hard to get rid of; it usually takes some radical treatment.

Like me.

Living people saw the Magellan as just another fleabag, probably seedier than most. When they checked in, they drank too much and drugged too much and about one in four of the permanent residents never left, or got carried out feet first the way I had. They jumped from windows, slashed veins, caught nasty transmittable diseases and coughed out their guts. To keep things lively, sometimes they offed each other, too, I was the poster child for that.

The Magellan was pain. A great big howling stinking cesspool of pain. What gave humans the creeps and headaches and depression was the ethereal sound of screaming, which wasn't even coming from the same level they lived on. Go up — well, down — one aetheric level and you couldn't walk the hall without stepping on the damned, couldn't get away from their grabbing hands and flailing feet. The Magellan was a big roach motel for souls, and they were stuck on the floors, the walls, the ceilings. It was the biggest damn piece of Hell I'd ever come in contact with.

I kept thinking, as I stepped on those screaming mother-of-pearl faces on my way down the hall, *there*

but for the grace of God ...

The Jersey shore was looking better and better.

"In there," Ed said. The door looked just like all the others, except it had a different number on it. I translated through the door to get to the first of my enemies. Ed, of course, held down the rear. In the hall. Fucking pansy-ass Archangel.

"Be careful," he said, which, had we been on the same side of the wall, might have earned him a pop in the mouth. But I had bigger problems.

Like the Major Demon sitting in the corner of that little smoky anteroom of Hell. Oh, sure, he looked like an old guy, like maybe he sold cannoli down in the old neighborhood, probably dandled babies on his knee and went to Mass every Sunday.

That's how I knew he was a Major Demon. They don't look to impress anybody.

"Vic," he said, and it sounded like my Grandpa Vito, who'd bet on a sure thing at Aqueduct and lost his entire life savings, including his wife Nona, and ended up eating the wrong end of a shotgun. Yeah, he sounded *exactly* like Grandpa Vito, even down to the wheezer's cough at the end. "Vic, I've been waiting to see you. How are you?"

"Fine," I said, and stood with my hands folded together, the posture of respect I'd learned long ago in the Sonny Caparelli family. You showed respect to power. It was just the way things were done. Shoot 'em in the back later, but always, respect to their faces. "Nice place."

He waved that away like a fly. There were some flies buzzing around, and they liked him, of course, they kept circling him like moths around a flame. I caught a whiff of him and figured out why. He smelled like week-old road kill. Chanel No. 5 for maggots.

"Vic," he said – and he was starting to piss me off with this first name crap – "Vic, a bright boy like you should look after his future. There's no advancement where you are. You're, what, some low-grade errand boy? Forget about the wings, they're just a cheap suit. You're never gonna get ahead up there, kid. Now, if you come to work for me –"

No, you know what? He didn't sound like my Grandpa Vito. He sounded like Milton Berle doing my Grandpa. Or maybe Jack Benny doing Milton Berle doing my Grandpa. With a little Brando thrown in, 'cause every body, even in Hell, has to do Brando. *Stelllllllllaaaaaa!*

I looked him over real good while he laid it all out for me – my own private circle in Hell, lots of space, all the fringe benefits you couldn't get upstairs, like booze and broads. He looked like about an 8 to me.

I went for the Number 8 cross, gilded, some rubies at the base, a little modest scrollwork. See, some kinds of crosses work better with some kinds of demons, don't ask me to explain why, it's part of that mysterious ways thing.

"Vic," he said. "Vic, again with the distraction? I'm trying to give you a future, here! What about the lake of fire swimming pool? What do I have to do, rip out my heart for you? All right! A membership in the second circle gambling casino, but I swear, you're killing me."

I took the Number 1 and tossed it in his direction, like a hand grenade, only I didn't have to duck. He

reached up to catch it. I waited for the big finale. Usually it was real messy.

Nothing happened. He opened his hand and looked at the cross, held it up to the light, picked a jeweler's loupe out of his pocket and checked out the stones. Shrugged.

"Not bad," he said. "You need to work on your metabolizing, you know? This third ruby's got a flaw. Nothing terrible, though. So, kid, that all you got?"

I held up one finger. Index finger.

"Hang on a second," I said, and stepped back out through the wall to where the damned screamed and wiggled like maggot architecture. Ed was hovering in mid-hall, looking anxious. "Number 8 didn't work."

He looked grave. Folded his hands. Looked angelic.

"What? All of a sudden I'm on my own?"

"Vic—"

"Again with the first names, what is it with you guys? Listen, you want this smelly old bastard dead, you do him yourself."

"Not all truths are true—"

"—for all, yeah, that's real—"

Grandpa Demon reached through the wall, ripping apart two screaming souls in the process, and yanked me back through into the room. It hurt. It hurt real bad.

Not all truths are true for all. Jesus Christ, what did that mean? I kept hearing it. It rang in my head like a bell. Battering against my thick skull, trying to tell me—

The demon shoved his hand into me. I tried to counterpunch, and my hands sank into him, and he wasn't Grandpa Vito anymore, he was a black stinking *thing* out of the pits and he was going to eat me, trap me inside that heavy slick darkness like a pearl inside an oyster, digest me a little at a time while I screamed.

Not all truths are true for all.

I went for crosses again. I might as well have been pelting him with candy corn.

Aw, come on! Not like this. Not like *this*.

NOT ALL TRUTHS ARE TRUE FOR ALL!

The demon said, in a voice like slime bubbling out of an open wound, "You Catholics, you're all the same. No imagination you've got."

I don't know where it came from, don't know how my head finally put it together, but all of a sudden in my hand clenched, and when I opened it I was holding a Star of David.

I threw it like a ninja toy.

It sliced across his throat in a shaft of pure white light.

It cut his head off.

That was it. The two halves of him fell, one east, one west, and the ugly black blob that was his head bumped across the floor until a table leg stopped it. It started melting into the carpet like superheated black plastic.

I metabolized another Star of David, just in case. I was thinking seriously about a menorah, too, in case I had to beat him into slime with it.

Behind me, Ed said, with genuine surprise, "Oh. You finally got it."

"Not all truths are true for all," I said. "Yeah. Thanks for being so totally fucking clear."

"Demons aren't all Christian, you know."

"No kidding."

"You got lucky this one was Jewish."

"Oh, yeah, I'm buying some lotto on the way home."

Oh, no. Here was that stupid tender look again. *Shit*. There was still one more, I'd forgotten all about it.

I was pretty much exhausted. Almost being disincorporated a couple of times will do that to you.

"You know what?" I said. "I'm done. Finito. Disincorporated out. You take the Buddha or whatever comes next and go beat that sucker into slime without me, because I am *done* for the day."

"I'm afraid that's impossible." He was shaking his head. "One more, and I promise we can—"

"What? Kick back and have a brew? Watch the Jets get the crap kicked out of them on the tube? You know what, I'm not in the mood for heaven right now. Just leave me the hell alone."

"You don't mean that." He sounded just *alittle* nervous about it. I glared and wished myself real elsewhere.

I didn't have any clear idea where I was going when I Translated, but I shouldn't have been surprised to end up where I did.

Room 409.

My final resting place.

"Shit," I sighed, and dropped into the same chair where I'd watched myself die.

Don't know why it came as a surprise, but my room was rented out. I mean on a human level. The battered dresser had clothes spilling out of it, the cracked mirror was draped with scarves and feather

boas and had a couple of pictures taped up in the corner. I stepped over to take a look and saw a nice looking kid, kind of on the skinny side, long brown hair and eyes that could have been either gray or green. It had the geeky charm of a junior high photo. The same kid was in the second photo, this time with her arms around a tired-looking older woman who had to be Mom.

Sweet. I took another look at the feather boas. Ratty, threadbare, the kind of cheap fantasy props that professionals used.

The hooker from downstairs came in the door and slammed it behind her, sank down on the unmade bed and took a long sip of the Coke I'd knocked out of the machine for her. Her eyes were closed, and in that second I saw the resemblance to the kid in the pictures, only about a million years older, the innocence scrubbed away with steel wool and despair.

I probably should have ducked out of the room. Hard to be sentimental about your death when there's somebody going about their business and not giving a crap. But I was tired, and the demon waiting for me down the hall wasn't going anywhere and anyway, I was having a labor dispute.

Her eyes opened, and just for a second I had the bizarre feeling she was staring at me. Seeing me. But then I heard the noise at the door, heard a one-knuckle knock, and she sighed and said, "Yo. Inside."

He could have been me. Oh, sure, he wasn't as good looking or nothing, but he had the eyes, the old cold eyes. Burly guy, mostly muscle. Bulge under his coat where he kept his insurance policy. I knew him just like dogs know each other, by smell.

"Hey, baby," he said. It wasn't personal. None of this was going to be personal. He took off his jacket and tossed it on the chair, took his gun and put it on the nightstand, stripped off suspenders and started unbuttoning his shirt. The kid stood up, put the Coke on the dresser, and reached out to help him.

He slapped her hands. Then he slapped her, just to get the point across. Tossed a twenty on the dresser and said, "Get on the bed."

Ed was behind me. I felt him there, like sun on skin that wasn't even there. I heard him say, "Perhaps we should go."

"Where's her guardian?" I asked. Silence from the Angel gallery. "Hey, pinhead, I'm talking to you. How come there's nobody here?"

"I don't know," Ed whispered. "We should go now. This isn't our business."

"Whose business is it? What, he's out getting a paper? Grabbing a movie? She's supposed to be watched!" I watched the girl unzip her plastic top and fold it back. Her breasts looked pale and small and cold. She got on the bed and lifted her knees. The guy, all business, unzipped his fly.

"Vic, we really need to go now. This isn't our place."

Maybe not, but it was *my* place. I had rights to this room. And nobody was slapping around teenage hookers in it while I was standing around.

I reached out with one hand and touched the guy, right in the center of his chest, and let him feel it. *Really* feel it, rippling cold like ice in his veins. He shivered and stepped back.

"Vic—" Ed was exasperated.

"Leave the twenty," I said, my lips close to the guy's ear. His eyes went blank. Blank and scared. He couldn't hear me, exactly, but he was definitely GettingThe Message. "Don't forget your gun."

He reached over and grabbed it up. Didn't even bother with his jacket.

The girl watched him go with a frozen look on her face that turned into relief when he passed up the Jackson on the dresser. She flopped back on the bed, blinked at the ceiling, and said, "Well, shit. Thanks."

"Don't mention it," I said. "Zip up. You're gonna catch a cold."

She didn't seem to hear me, but she zipped up anyway, still staring at the ceiling.

Ed, with just a slight edge in his voice, said, "Vic."

"I'm coming." But I wasn't, not just yet. Maybe it was that she was lying there where I'd died, maybe it was just that she was the first actual person I'd really noticed since they'd carted my corpse off to the morgue. I don't know what made me sit down on the edge of the bed and look at her.

Her eyes were green. Not gray. Green like cool marble.

"You're gonna be okay," I said, and reached over to put my hand over hers. It was lying wrist-up, and there were scars there, lots of scars. A couple of suicide attempts, some Johns who liked wire instead of ropes. "I'll be back."

"Why?" she asked. The green eyes moved and came to rest on my face.

She could see me. That flashed over me hot and cold and hot again. I slowly leaned left to see if her eyes followed me.

They did.

"I'm not afraid," she said. "I see things sometimes. Like you. But they don't scare me anymore."

Behind me, Ed made a noise I'd never heard out of an angel, like all the air had just been poked out of him. I heard him sink into a chair.

"Why not?" I asked. The kid just smiled. "What's your name, kid?"

"Harley."

"Harley what?" She shrugged. Didn't matter. "This doesn't bother you? Talking to the air?"

"You're not air," she said. She reached out and touched the side of my face. This time I was the one who felt cold, thrown off stride by the unexpected contact. She couldn't really touch me, of course, but it *felt* like she did. She *acted* like she had. "Did you die in here?"

"You don't want to hear about it, trust me."

She smiled and rolled over on her stomach, stared at the headboard. After a few seconds she turned her head and pillowed her cheek on her arm. Her eyes weren't quite focused on me anymore. Her pupils were blown wide open – heroin, I guessed. She had that kind of sunshine glow. It took heroin to make Room 409 look like someplace you'd want to hang around talking to the dead.

"Vic," Ed hissed. "We have to go. I mean it."

"Yeah, okay," I said. "Listen, sweetheart, I gotta split. You take care, okay? I'll check back."

"Okay," she murmured, and closed those agate-green eyes. She was asleep in the time it took Ed to grab my arm and Translate me the hell out of there.

Took me a second or two to recognize that Ed wasn't looking all Ed anymore. He had gone up a level, out of anything like human form, into a harsh white blinding light with those damn wings and a face like cold marble. Ed with the Flaming Sword.

"You will *never*," he said in a voice that might've shattered glass, "*never* do that again. It's not your place."

When a friggin' Flaming Angel tells you that, I mean, you ought to listen. But I was in no mood, believe me. I went up a level, too – it hurt, and it was pretty much as high as I was able to go without somebody yanking me by the short hairs – and did a little aetheric flaming of my own.

"Yeah?" I snarled. "Whose place was it? I'd like to know, because if he don't start paying attention to his job–"

"I'm her guardian," Ed said simply.

I took the time to think about it before I said some things better left unsaid to a boss, an Angel, or somebody who could crush me like a stinkbug. I said 'emanyway. Ed just looked at me, all tender again, a parent disappointed in a bad kid who just doesn't get the point.

"One more," he said. "Shall we do this and get you home?"

Home. Yeah. Home. Home where we could all hide our heads and pretend Hell wasn't happening, wasn't sucking in kids like Harley, wasn't spreading out to eat everything in the Magellan lock, stock and soul. Because all I had to do was kick one more demonic ass and go home. Let the next poor bastard take on the underworld.

I said, "What about her?"

I couldn't tell what was going on in Ed's blue eyes. Nothing. Everything. *Shit*.

"He's upstairs," Ed said. "Room 520. Be careful."

I walked into Room 520 and found my best friend cleaning his gun. His name was Joey "Two-Tone" Vanzetti, and in the old days there hadn't been a dime's difference between us; the same oil-black hair, the same blue eyes, the same Made Guy killer smile. Joey had gone more into administration. I liked to keep my hand in.

Joey looked up, smiled, and kicked a chair out from the table. "Vic. Been too long. Sit."

"What am I, your dog?" I felt it coming off of him, waves of black, pain, evil. Oh, man. No way could I sit down with that. "What the fuck, Joey?"

He snapped the slide on his automatic and checked the chamber. Always picky about his piece, Joey. Always cleaning. He loaded a clip in and laid the gun down on the table between us.

"They let me keep it," he said. "I'm guessing you don't got one anymore, Vic. What do they let you do, strum a little harp? Sing a few choruses of 'Ave Maria'? What a fucking joke."

I didn't say anything. Joey always was a talker. I remembered this time we took a guy out to the docks and Joey kept talking, talking all the time about his wife, his kids, his mortgage, the price of good steel-belted radials. He talked right up until the time he'd put two in the back of the guy's head.

I wished to hell I had a gun, but that was the one thing I *couldn't* have. Guns were what I'd left behind. If I reached for a gun, I lost everything. The rules sucked, but I hadn't made 'em.

"Your wife, Gina – you remember Gina, right – you know, she got real lonely after you were gone. Oh, wait, she got real lonely *before* you were gone. Did you know she was pumping the guy in 14-B when you went out to work? I got a look, Vic, it wasn't pretty. Listen, sit down, would you? I'm getting a backache, here."

"Let's just do this," I said. When I was ten, me and Joey had seen our first dead guy. He'd been lying in the street in a pool of blood. He'd tripped and bashed his head open on the curb. I remembered Joey walking right up to the dead guy, looking down into the open eyes, and saying, *It's not so bad, Vic*. He'd scared me then.

He scared me worse now that I could see him without the bullshit of a lifetime of friendship.

"Do what?" Joey cocked his head. "You gonna hurt me, Vic?"

"That's the plan."

He was quiet for a while, which wasn't like Joey, not at all. Then he said, "They came into my house, Vic. They came into my house and they shotgunned me and my wife. I didn't get no friggin' last rites. No confession. Nothing. So I end up here."

"You didn't have to."

"Like hell. My history, this is where you end up. It ain't so bad. I get to do what I do best."

"What's that, Joey?"

"Take out soft little pricks like you all day, every day," he said. "Same thing you do. Only you're friggin' doing it on the wrong side."

I didn't say anything. The talking was over. Me and Joey, we were scheduled for a dance.

Joey picked up the gun and looked down the barrel, a stupid thing to do except even if he finger twitched and he blew his head off, hey, so what? Wasn't like he couldn't get another one. The gun turned

around to focus on me. It was like it was alive, that gun, alive and hungry.

"Know what?" he said. "Let's take a walk, Vic."

How many guys had I said that to? *Let's take a walk*. The walk only went one direction.

"Sure," I said. "Let's stroll."

We went out into the hall. The fifth floor, Joey's floor, was, if anything, worse than the lower ones. These damned souls weren't just stuck to the floors and walls and ceilings, they were embedded into wallpaper and trapped behind coats of paint, so the walls moved all the time, all those damned trying to slither out. Made me dizzy. The carpet rippled, too, and the screaming was loud enough to bust out light bulbs.

Joey walked down the hall ahead of me. Where he stepped things bled and screamed and begged for mercy.

Damn, I wished I had a gun. I really really did. The back of Joey's head was a tempting target. Trouble was, there wasn't much of a step between wishing and doing.

He went down the stairs to the fourth floor, turned right at the landing and leaned against a piece of wall with a guy hanging out of it. The guy was screaming and dripping blood from a cut throat. Joey put a hand over his mouth to shut him up and said, "Hey, Vic?"

"What?"

Joey's grin cut through the air between us like a shark fin. "Ready? Here it comes. You're gonna love this part."

He didn't shoot me. He looked at the stairs.

Remember the guy from Harley's room? The guy I'd sent off without his twenty? He was back, walking up the steps, heading for the landing. Heading for Room 409.

"Keep up with current events?" Joey asked. "Probably not, you guys probably don't even get *USA Today*. There's this killer, Vic. A real mean bastard. He likes knives and he likes to use 'em for a long, long time. They call him the Ginsu Killer."

This guy was manifesting on the etheric plane. Oh, sure, some humans could do it, mostly saints and swamis and Eagle Scouts, but I'd never seen one manifest like this. He threw a shadow, a big huge soul-sucking shadow that made me cold when it touched me.

This was the guy I'd thrown out of Harley's room.

He was carrying a paper sack.

"Know what's in the sack, Vic?" Joey asked. "Knives. All kinds of knives. Paring knives, boning knives, fish-gutting knives, big bread knives."

"He's one of yours," I said. Joey had this proud-parent look as the guy walked past us, passing doors. He passed 401. 403. 405.

"Yeah. I got real hopes for this one."

407.

I wasn't too worried, really. Because down at the end of the hall, next to Room 409, stood Ed, my Angelic boss in all his aetheric bozo glory. Didn't look like much, but then he didn't have to. Ed was High Up. Like the cranky Grandpa Demon I'd doffed earlier, Ed didn't need to put on a light show. He'd just get the job done.

Funny thing, though. Joey wasn't worried, either.

"Watch this," he said. "This is the good part."

The guy walked up to Room 409.

And Ed ...

Ed stepped out of the way.

The guy opened the door to 409 and went inside. Closed it. I heard the click of the lock.

Ed looked up at me, and what was in there wasn't mild anymore, wasn't gentle, wasn't even sad.

His eyes were telling me *medon't*.

"*Youfuck!*" I spat, and forgot all about Joey. I Translated.

Harley was asleep, face down on the bed. Sleeping like a heroin angel. The guy put down his paper sack on the bed and shook knives out like silver icicles; the noise they made was louder than all the screaming souls in this pocket of hell. I reached out –

--and Ed wrapped his arms around me and held me. Held me still. Held me tight.

Held me useless while the sick bastard picked out his first knife, a thin-bladed little Ginsu number that could probably cut through steel pipe, and took hold of her arm.

"Let go!" I screamed. I was strong, you know. I could toss around demons, I could shred matter like smoke. But Ed was stronger. "Ed! Jesus, let go!"

He held me very still. As the guy put the knife to Harley's skin, Ed whispered in my ear, "Nobody lives forever, Vic. Being a Guardian means knowing when to turn away. You have to stop protecting them."

He did, closing his eyes, turning his face so he wouldn't have to look.

I watched the whole thing, all the way, all the screaming and the horror and the sick pathetic *stupidity* of it, and when I felt her body let go of her soul, Ed released me and reached for her.

She drifted right past him ... to Joey, who was waiting in the other corner. Oh, man, no. Not after all this, not after what she'd just been through. She'd end up another damned screaming soul stuck to the

floor, another toy for Joey to play with ...

Not all truths ...

It was like the second I'd metabolized the Star of David. I knew. Didn't know how I knew, but I did. Instinct. Instinct and passion, like Ed had said.

I could stop this.

I metabolized a gun.

"No!" Ed burst out, but it was too late and for the first time in a long time I knew damn well what I was doing. This was my working gun, a chrome S&W .45 with jacketed hollow points, and the way it fit my hand was like a lady's hip on my palm.

I shot Joey six times, point black, centermag .

And Joey disincorporated screaming.

I grabbed Harley's aetheric body and held on to her, held on until she opened those agate-green eyes and looked at me and said, "Vic?" and even though that kind of thing didn't mean anything anymore, I kissed her before I took her hand and put it in Ed's.

Safe. She was safe now.

"Joey," I said to Ed. "Only religion he ever had was the gun. That's why they let him keep it."

Ed looked shocked. Pale. I looked over at the Ginsu Killer and all his bright shiny knives and wished I could shoot him, too.

Not my job. I was an exterminator, but he wasn't my kind of roach.

"Get her out of here," I said to Ed. "Take her home, would you?"

"Why?" he whispered. "You knew it would keep you here. Why did you do it?"

I looked at the .45 in my hand, the only friend I'd ever had I could count on, and said, "Somebody's got to stay. Next guy might not be so qualified."

So I'm back in Room 409. Ed drops around to make sure I'm doing okay, sort of like those home visits from the parish priest; the Magellan's still a pit, and from time to time it's still a hell-hole, but all in all, it ain't nearly as bad as it was. The damned souls in the halls are gone, except for a stubborn few that just won't clear out 'cause they don't think they can, the dumb shits, and every once in a while a Demon will pop its pointy head up into my hotel. The last one nearly got me – some damn Vishnu-worshipping son of a bitch – but I'm hanging in. I figure another twenty, thirty years, the city might bulldoze this fleabag and put up a Hyatt Regency. I'm sticking around for that. It'll still be a pipeline to Hell, but at least it'll have cable.

Meanwhile, room next to me's empty.

Knock yourself out.

--end --