

There is life and death. For nearly an eternity, this has been the balance. However, there are things that defy the order. There are creatures that walk dead. There are beings that live from the blood of others. And there is me. I am Charon, an angel of Death. Our Father has anointed me to restore the holy balance, but I must lessen my abilities, furl my wings and walk amongst the greatest of His creations: humans. With the help of a mortal doctor, I will set death on its righted path. I will return the order.

Death and Holliday – “O Grave where is thy Victory?”

“**B**rother.”

The angel turned. His black wings fluttered slightly. He wore a black robe that was long and flowing. His hair was short and dark, where some of his kin had locks of long flowing tressels, his was curled and close. He knelt.

“I had not expected you to see me off, Principality.”

“Charon,” spoke Laora, “You are about to embark on a holy mission. It is the least I could do to come see you. Rise and let us walk.” The female angel shined brightly. There were portions to her being that could not be seen, they only shined and left nothing to be seen to.

She gestured and her brother rose. They walked.

“Have you finished your preparatory work?”

Charon nodded. Overhead, lanes of angels soared. They were orbs of burning white light from the view below. Their songs passed over like choirs dipping in and out of hearing.

“Yes, sister. I have spoken with those who are experts in properly descending. Ariniel is quite knowledgeable about moving and working amongst mortals.”

Laora smiled wide. “Ariniel, so young and so accomplished. His exploits and adventures are already lore!”

Charon returned her grin. “And his hair...”

“He may have literally spent eternity on it.”

The siblings shared a slight laugh.

“Are you certain of this, brother?” And the mood finally shifted. The duo reached an area in the golden street that was cornered off. It was a type of locking doorway only one that pointed down.

“I am. Ours is more than just ferrying. We must maintain the order of life and death. Too many occurrences below have upset things. Too many anomalies exist amongst the humans.”

“The undead.”

Charon nodded. “And those that walk dead. There are the Draugr, the ghouls, the Lich and the Wights to name a few. Those that live from the blood of others and do live forever. Those that remain on Earth long after they should have been ferried off. They are legion, they are many and they disrupt the fabric of things.”

Laora nodded. “Yes. At first, it was only a handful in existence but the more mortals find new gains in their sciences and technology, they more they walk from His path to...theirs.”

“The Fallen. The Rebels.”

She nodded. “Yes, they have a stake in these things, brother. With each growth of abominations that defy life and defile death, the foundation of things cracks a little more. The stink of decay that grows on Earth every day, the odor of the rot of the creaking bones and infested flesh escapes the mortals who may suffer so greatly.”

“Which is why I begged our Father to grant me this charge. I will right things. I will face against those who usurp the journey, who upset the ferry.”

“Such a large mission, Charon,” she replied, “Guard yourself. You are strong in our Father’s anointment. Are you strong in that which must happen? Are you solid in the rules of your journey?”

Charon was silent.

“One, you now can move mountains or cut stars from the sky. But after the descent, you will be far weaker. You will be more than mortal but your angelic prowess will be greatly lessened.”

“Two, you now no now pain. You fear no weapon formed save those of our fallen kind. But after the descent, you will be far weaker. You will be more than a mortal but your angelic invincibility will be greatly lessened.”

Charon drew a deep breath. “I am prepared to furl my wings, Laora.”

“Good. Third and possibly the harshest of all. Should your ersatz body be broken and damaged enough, your divine essence can be exorcised by one of the Rebels.”

The angel of death’s right hand wandered to his back. “I have not dealt with one of them since the Fall. I still have the wound in my back.”

“As do we all. When you arrive amongst the mortals, you’ve never been amongst our siblings in this way before. The Fallen will hunt you as you attempt to dislodge their plans. If they beat and batter your shell enough, they can cast you from Earth.”

“You’ve...experienced it?”

Laora’s eyes narrowed. Her lips tightened. “Twice. And on my way back, on my way hurled from Earth back to Heaven, I passed through Hell.”

Charon listened. He placed a hand on the Principality’s shoulder. “I am an angel of death, bright one. I have seen much---“

“Guard yourself, little brother. They can do things to us in the Office of Misery, in the Halls of Pandemonium where the Light-Bringer screams and rants...they can do things that even we cannot imagine.”

Charon nodded. His full-lips smiled and he walked towards paradise’s exit and the door to the realm of mortals. The exit was a sealed aperture. It was golden and bright yet around it, dark light flickered from its seams. A structure grew around it, like vines spreading up through sidewalks. Except instead of foliage, this growth was made of something akin to bone.

“Sister!” Charon exclaimed, “What has happened to the Exit?”

“The descent has been repositioned to place you at a point of approaching unholy resurrection. There is a foul presence there and the rank and fetid force of it reaches back up through the very ether.”

The angel of death exhaled and his face lost its sudden shock. “Then...I had best begin my endeavor. I—I just wonder...nothing. It is not of importance.”

The Principality waved a hand and turned her brother. “All things are of importance, ferryman. What is it that troubles you?”

Charon pointed downward. “With all that afflicts them, with all that dogs them, with the nearly limitless ways in which they can suffer and pain, why is it that the humans cling to life so?”

Laora was silent.

“Time after time after time, in those last moments, they curse me. They scratch. They claw. Despite the pain, regardless of the wound, never minding the tragedy, they all want to stay. Do they not know of the glory that awaits so many of them?”

Laora placed a glowing hand on her brother's shoulder. "They are a mystery that has taught many an angel about our Father and His gift of life. You will find the answer to your trouble."

The angel of death smiled once again and nodded. Gold welled up and teared down his sister's cheeks. She closed her eyes and burned so bright even the pale rider had to look away.

"I SALUTE YOU, CHARON."

And with that, he turned into the exit and was gone.

An angel's senses were more than the five levels of understanding for a mortal. Charon's eyes had seen to the outskirts of creation. His ears had heard the crack of reality burst from nothingness. The angel of death had felt the tingles of divine travel crackled atop his celestial flesh as he ferried souls from mortal coil. Charon had tasted the waters of salvation that poured out onto golden streets when the Lamb was born, when the Lamb died and was born again.

And now, an angel's senses were violently assaulted.

His eyes burned with gale force winds. Charon's ears pierced with shrieking howls like a great storm beat about him. The angel of death felt his skin shred and rip with slashes and swipes as if a great beast lit into his very essence. He tasted something metallic in his mouth; a flavor not sampled since the Great War.

He tasted his own blood; metallic and divinely pure gold.

A hush of air as the world turned inside out.

Charon felt something under his palms. It was the ground. More specifically, it was cracked cement, sparsely broken with grass growing up through its spiderweb of needed-construction. He had felt nothing like the sensations that were flooding his very essence.

The ground was solid and pushed back against his hands as he rose.

The air was crisp and filled his nostrils.

Charon looked at the world around him. His eyes were not those that he had used to see the ends of creation or watch the constant ladder descent and ascent of angels. He narrowed his gaze and was able to see far beyond that of the humans he saw all over the city around him.

The world was silent. Despite the gale winds that had torn at his very ears mere moments ago, now it was a hush and the only noise seemed to be the sounds of life in the distance. Cars honking. Planes soaring. People talking. Yet it was all so far away.

He dusted off the debris and dirt from his clothing. Gone were his robes and divine armor. Gone was his sword and sickle holstered in their God-crafted sheaths. Now he was adorned much simpler. The mortals called his clothing "jeans" and "boots." An ink-black t-shirt clung to his artificial body. It was equally a shade of darkness as the rest of his wardrobe.

He shrugged a bit. Gone were his mammoth wings and their all-encompassing span. He had furled them as the descent gripped him. Now a three-quarter leather jacket enshrouded his shoulders.

And the angel was outside a darkened emergency clinic.

It appeared as abandoned as the area where Heaven had pointed his arrival. The lights to the facility were off. Blackness poured from inside out and vice versa. The main entrance doors hung off their hinges with unnerving creaks. Windows were broken. The driveway was abandoned and even an ambulance lay on its side. If this place was ever one of healing, it had long ago lost such status.

Charon looked at the cracked foundation and the miles between clinic and civilization. He took a step to begin his investigation. He pondered calling Heavenward to speak for guidance.

“Do you need emergency assistance?” The angel looked and there was a man, a human in soiled white clothes. They were medical scrubs except that they were streaked with dark fluid and spots. The man’s hair was disheveled and he had a grin that was pulled back like a death-face grimace.

“You should hurry and get in line...the doctor is having troubles seeing patients today.”

The angel frowned. The off-balanced man before him had gouges where his eyes should be. Reddish black apertures looked at him with no expression.

“It is sad,” began a voice just off to the side, “That the only times you Loyals ever come down to actually interact with these mortals is when one of us is involved.”

Charon turned and faced a man walking from the darkness of the blacked out deserted clinic. He had a similar garb to the newly descended angel. They were similar in multiple ways, tall in stature, athletic in build and attractive in appearance.

Except his eyes were a metallic red.

“Xolotiel...” Charon spoke.

The eyeless medic leapt from one angel to another. “Master!” He landed and found a place at the new entity’s side.

Charon’s new guest ran fingers through the crouching mortal’s hair. “I am touched,” Xolotiel answered to death’s angel. “You remember me, big brother.”

“How could I forget you? You betrayed me...personally.” The death angel’s hand wandered to his back again.

The fallen angel smiled wide. “Still hurts a little, doesn’t it? Don’t be so sensitive. There were so many others.”

“Is this the hope of my former flock brothers and sisters?” the Loyal questioned. “Those of you who would have become ferrymen have instead found paths to defile and defy death?”

Xolotiel shrugged. And with his movement, something cried out in the background. “Pretty much.”

“The masters are going to bring us power over life and death!” cried out the eyeless man. “We’ll be more than God Himself!” With the last words, spittle flew from the man’s mouth. He returned to the devil’s side.

Xolotiel’s countenance changed. He took an unnecessary breath. “Because we belonged to the same sub-order, because we once were in the same flock, I offer you this one time chance to leave, Charon. Unfurl those dark wings and get the Hell out of here.”

“No.”

“GO! Do you not have somewhere else to be? Isn’t there some premature baby waiting for your cold embrace? Surely some sick man with blood in his cough is begging for your travel? Go and do what you do!”

“Why the sudden show of concern for my wellbeing, Xolotiel? After the Fall, I thought you had not the stomach for sympathy? Nor the taste for family?”

“I have my reasons, Charon. And they have the stomachs now... They have the taste.”

The doors pushed open slowly. They creaked on rotted hinges. The mutilated medic clapped his hands. “They’re HERE! They’re HERE!”

Charon's brow lowered with a frown. His hands fell alongside his coat and threw back the tails. Before he could move however, his expression changed. His eyes widened. His mouth fell agape. The body of the celestial creature trembled violently and he fell to his hands and knees.

Xolotiel knelt beside the shivering death-angel. "It's overwhelming, isn't it, brother?"

"Wh-wh-what is it?"

The devil beside him looked up and around. "It's them."
Alleyways clanged with sudden traffic.
Sewer covers pushed open from underneath.
The angel of death looked around him.
Shambling corpses moaned and shuffled towards him. Their hands outstretched and their jaws snapped.
"They're going to taste some angel."

Saint Anthony Hospital shined in the evening sky. A large blue cross burned bright with incandescence and beneath its glow several ambulances soared into its emergency area. Medics and doctors called out reports. Nurses made rounds and patients lamented under the weight of their illnesses.

Dr. Veena Holiday clicked the mouse of her computer. Her glasses hung on her slightly pointed nose. It crinkled slightly as the bluish white digital lighting reflected off her spectacles. She held a pencil in her teeth, never noticing she was biting down on it. Her shoulder length black hair had fallen out of the bun she had tied it in lost hours and unknown shifts ago.

"Vee," and the voice was deep and booming, "You've been here all night. Go home. Rest." The door had opened without her notice. Her supervisor, boss and long time friend Doctor James Jacobs stood in front of her desk. He was a large man, once only in height but years of hospital food and age had given him an almost equaling amount of width.

Next to Dr. Jacobs was his fellow assisting physician, Dr. Pearlman. Smaller in stature and younger in years than Jacobs, Pearlman stood just off to the side of the giant. His eyes, though, were equally full of concern.

"He's right, Veena," Seth Pearlman added. "You're not doing anyone, least of all yourself, any good here like this."

"I can't, you two." She leaned back, wiping her eyes slightly. Not since she had burned hours of days and nights in college and medical school had the young woman been without so much sleep. Once she had a plan of school, a career, a man, a family and these plans were the same as her mother's. Now, despite her still appealing looks and personality, Holliday had no social life. She had no life at all.

"I think I'm close to some additional research. I can't go home now."

"Well then hell, go sleep in the supply closet. Just rest Veena. What we've done so far can wait one more night." Jim Jacobs rose to his full size. A mammoth paw of a hand came down and closed the laptop. Another big hand went up in mid-air, putting pause to the growing protest from his former intern.

"That's an order." Jacobs smiled softly yet sternly and left the room. Pearlman smiled and exited as well.

The laptop fired back up. Vee focused on the screen in front of her. She flipped through the patient chart on her left.

Tears welled up in her eyes.

"You see when we halt the Order, when we upset the Balance that you cling to so hard - it lashes back and the waves of power it sends out..." Xolotiel closed his eyes and shuddered himself. "It is orgasmic."

Charon continued to dig into the ground. His fingers cracked cement and dirt the same. The resurrected dead were now entombing them in their own carcasses and broken bodies. They shuffled and slid. Those without legs crawled on two arms, dragging dried entrails and fluid trails. The zombies were piling onto the angel who was himself, burrowing into the ground from pain and pleasure.

Xolotiel was alongside his former comrade and friend. "I warned you to leave, pale rider, and you didn't listen. Now, you've tasted it and do not tell me, do not insult me that you can turn your back on this."

Charon closed his eyes, spittle flicking from his trembling lips. He pulled his arms and legs in tight.

"I truly am sorry, Charon. We discovered this possibility before the War. For those like us, for those that would be angels of death before we even knew death would exist, it was a great allure. The Morning Star and his rebel generals whispered this to our ears and we were addicted before even tasting the drug. I thought of telling you, brother but I knew you would never have joined us."

A corpse, once female, now clinging to tight skin and one thing that had been a breast, ran its fingers through Charon's short dark curls.

"I would rather kill you than corrupt you, death-angel," Xolotiel said. "But now, I'll leave that to them. They overpower you while you tremble and run thick with the elixir that runs from their presence. Afterwards, a Rebel will come along and cast you back."

Charon grit his teeth and with closed eyes, whispered one word. "...no..." He threw his arms and legs wide, his eyes burned black and the angel exploded from the form that he had adopted. The wretched resurrected were sent hurtling. For a moment, Charon was not bright and shiny as he was in Heaven. He was not attractive and mysterious as he was on Earth. He was something awing. Dark light and massive wings. Black feathers and a swirl of chains. A hooded force that swung wide an expected scythe.

"THE ORDER WILL BE RETURNED, REBEL!"

In the same blink of an eye that saw this terrible force unchained, Charon was in a man shell again. He was standing now. The angel appeared recomposed however there was some tremble in his hands. There was some huff of breath.

His fallen brother slid to his side once again.

"If you unleashed into all you are, you could no more touch these things than the fog. But you, we, once all watched Him cut creation from nothing. We soared on thought itself and shattered through anything in our path. You cut down empires in one night. And yet, all that power and you have to stay..."

He tapped Charon on the shoulder. "...This."

The death angel was silent.

"O grave, where is thy victory? Not much you can do, brother. You can't continue this mission now that you know how it feels. Just leave."

The death angel threw his coat off and it unrolled into an almost endless tarp. "I am Charon, Ferryman of the First rank of the Holy, Secondary Warrior to the Principalities..." With the snap of the three-quarter coat, it showed a long arrangement of weapons.

"I know death..." There was a range from swords and clubs to assault rifles and RPGs. "I deal death." Charon dove and pulled up with a FN P90 assault rifle. The short barrel sent a barrage through several skulls, shattering heads and dropping undead soldiers.

Being an angel had shown Charon an eternity of battle and conflict. Being an angel of death had shown him ways and styles of murder and massacre since Cain and the rock that bled from Abel. He had arrived at the ends of all types of battles and learned. Death had studied.

Several corpses hissed and leapt atop the ferryman. Several blows to key spots split skulls in half, exposing rotted gray matter that ceased sending signals and impulses to the body. They fell into slumps. Several cadavers leapt into the air with gaping maws of cemetery drool and desire. The pale rider spun and fired several precise shots from dual Glock 17s.

A rain of brain and bone misted from the collapsing corpses.

A trio of former-females stormed their way to the avenging angel. One carried a large portion of a gravestone above her hairless and lipless head. Death stood tall and a large sickle slid from his sleeves. He circled it around his stance.

Three spins and three skulls came apart. The bodies fell to piles of parts now finally dead.

The short battle was over.

Charon looked around. Xolotiel was gone. The mind-sick human remained. He danced and bounced around laughing wickedly to himself.

“We’ll be gods ourselves! This plague will spread, angel! It will spread over all of man and only the selected will survive!!!”

The angel of death walked over as he fixed his coat. He towered over the mortal.

“Andrew, you have defiled our Father’s gift---“

“How---how do you know my name?” stammered the eyeless man.

“I am an angel, Andrew. We know everyone’s names.”

“Well...Well, I know some of your rules, LOYAL. You can’t touch me. You can only deal wrath on your family!”

Charon’s head tilted forward. He almost leaned into the eyeless madman. “And those who associate with them, Andrew...”

The medic paused. His mouth partially opened.

The angel waived his hand.

And in his palm was the name tag from the eyeless mortal.

It read “Saint Anthony Hospital.”

Charon walked away, a new destination in mind.

The shambling corpses were dissolving. Just as the human who had consorted with devils, for he was now a pillar of salt.

Metal squares lined the walls. Several tables were empty but a few were not. The occupants lie under draped sheets with cold feet and toe tags hanging in identification. The lights were off, leaving only the few emergency lights on in the corners. And in this darkness, several silhouettes were gathered together.

“So, are things going according to plan?”

“I am not sure, I am waiting to hear from him.”

“Is he still speaking with us? We haven’t heard from him in so long...”

There was a hush of air. A noise of flapping wings. “You mortals are so impatient.”

“Master!!”

“Save it. There is good news and bad. Good news is that the serum works: the dead resurrect. They rise again---“

“We’ve found a way to beat death?”

A pause. “Yes you have. You’ve found a way to beat death and he’s come to Earth to even the score.”

“Hi Mom, I’m home.” As the door to the apartment shut, the last words “I’m home” lost volume and strength. Vee removed her coat. A nurse was putting on hers and walking to the young doctor.

“Hi Doctor Holliday. She’s resting fine.”

“Thanks Jillian.” As the older caregiver exited, Veena walked into a bedroom and stood at the foot of her mother’s bed. Although with the flurry of wires and tubes in and around the sheets, it was hard to tell that this was a place for resting. Madhu Holliday lie with closed eyes and no other response, no other sign of life.

The stroke had taken her hard. By the time Vee found her at home, the woman had been unconscious for hours on her kitchen floor. The damage to her brain was severe. The possibilities of her recovery were non-existent.

But Madhu’s daughter fought the courts, fought her family. She held on and poured every cent, every iota of energy and every waking thought into bringing her mother back.

She had even talked Pearlman and Jacobs into backing her research into brain restoration. The synthesis was theoretical at best.

“Mom...”

Vee pulled up the familiar stool next to her mother’s side. Her face was kept washed. Her hair kept groomed. Madhu had been a woman of class. She was stylish yet simple.

Now she simply was. The spark of her laughter and the funny way her accented words still hung in the air were all gone. Madhu was reduced to a shell but one doctor refused to believe it.

Veena held her mother’s hands. The same hands that had picked the little girl up when she fell running in the streets keeping up with her cousins. The same hands that had spent hours in the kitchen making her favored Tandoori Chicken. The same hands that Veena had filled with IVs in order to stabilize her failing body.

“Veena...”

Holliday jumped. She spun and Doctor Pearlman stood at the doorway. He had his coat in his arms and was far from threatening. His brown suit looked as if he could swim in it. He was always the picture opposite of Jacobs.

“Oh, God...Seth...sorry I jumped like that. I forget that you and Jim have keys.”

“No worries. Most of our testing and theorizing is done, we could give you back the keys---“ Veena waved off Seth’s words.

“No, you and Jim have been amazing. Who knows? Mom may need you guys to come walk her out of here one day!” The two doctors smiled. One through teary eyes.

“Vee, have you been noticing anything strange about Jim lately? Late hours, hard to find, things like that.”

The young furrowed her brow.

“No, not really. God, sounds like you’re asking about Fife again? He disappeared and no one’s seen him since.”

Pearlman drew a deep breath. “Yeah, I’m worried though. Because after Fife disappeared, we found all that satanic mumbo-jumbo and demonology books in his locker. He had talked about hearing voices and suggestions. And Andrew did work with Jim pretty close.”

Veena Holliday sunk a bit at her mom’s side.

“Don’t worry, Vee,” Seth began, “I’m sure it’s probably nothing. You take care. I’ll see you at the hospital. And yes, I plan on walking your mom right out of here one day!”

Pearlman left and Holliday sat alone with a shell that was once and may still be her mother.

The sun was setting on another day. The sky was a soft blue that only came with the dawning of a new morning or the arrival of an approaching evening. While most of the mammoth city's population was finishing its work day, there were those whose shifts were just beginning. Such a crew was arriving via CTA buses pulling up to the main office building of Saint Anthony's Hospital.

As doctors and nurses and other health care workers walked off the bus, no one noticed the man standing in the recesses behind the hospital. Charon looked upward into the sky that he had not long ago descended from.

The ferryman stood in an alley behind St. Anthony. He closed his dark eyes.

"Laora..."

Suddenly, she was before him. Blazing in bright white light and accompanied by a chorus, the Principality descended. Charon raised a hand up to his artificial eyes.

"Little brother," she said, her voice reverbed with an echo. "How fare thee?"

"These eyes, sister," he squinted, "This form. Did you know the feelings...the grip that would befall me in the presence of these undead and resurrected?"

"No, ferryman, I did not."

Charon nodded.

"Do you desire to end your mission? Would not be one among us that would question you."

"Thank you, sister but I need to continue. Though it weakens me, it must be done. There is something here at this hospital that is tied to the upset of the Order."

"I miss you all."

"And we you."

Vee Holliday exited the bus as it had stopped at the hospital's corner. She walked, going over her day in her head. Going over her assignments in her mind. Moving through her tasks as though the failing and frail form of her mother did not creep its way into her head by way of her heart.

She looked down the alley as something bright caught her eye.

For a moment, she saw a crackling and nearly blinding dark light, a purple and black crackle of power. Up above it, she saw a fountain of white yellow light sparkling down from the sky.

She shook her head and looked again.

The young doctor now saw a man in the alley typing on a tablet computer. His fingers moved fast and he spoke with a wireless head set in his ear. Holliday shrugged and continued her walk into the hospital.

Charon's head lowered. "I must go, Laora."

"Is there anything else, brother?"

"In my encounter, I--I unleashed a portion of my true power. Instead of what I am in Heaven, I was emerged as something else. Something...dark. It was a depiction of how mortals have seen me and my flock. It was something robed, bladed, layered of bones and reaping with terror."

"In the presence of the disorder and unbalance, a wounded side of you was unleashed. Mind it, my friend. Please."

Charon nodded.

"Some of us fell from grace. Some of us can be pushed."

Veena walked in her office. There was a man at her desk. For a second, he was not a man. He was light, dark and purple. Then he was something dark and robed. A skull's jaw jutting from endless blackness. Wings flapped in roaring anger.

Then again he was a man.

Holliday jumped back.

She wiped her eyes.

“What the---Who the Hell are you?”

“Be not afraid...”

“Be not--? Who talks like that? Anyway, sir, I asked you a question!”

“Your research is brilliant, Veena.”

“How do you know---? That's it, I'm calling security—“

“Why do you want to keep her alive?”

Doctor Holliday was nearly struck to the floor. “WHO THE HELL DO YOU---???”

“Your mother, Veena. Madhu was a unique creation as you all are. Why do you not allow her entry into the next life?”

“Are you crazy? I don't---“

“You've been defying death since your first day on the job. You cursed God as a little girl died on a table while you worked furiously to save her. You held CPR for hours on a man who had been injured in a car accident before your mother was stricken ill.”

“How do you know---?”

“I need your help, Veena and I do not have the time for ruse or disguise with you.”

The doctor stumbled back. Charon closed his eyes and opened his arms.

Veena Holliday could barely look directly at him. He was light, pure and burning. She heard multiple voices amidst a sound of singing. From the man's torso, mammoth wings burst forth. They were dark and feathered. They beat once and reached the edges of her office. His t-shirt and jacket, jeans and shoes were gone and a combination of armor and flowing robes adorned him.

“My name is Charon. I am an angel.”

Holliday's face turned from shock to furrowed brow. “—you---I saw you---in the alley...”

In the light, the man's head tilted. “Amazing. Some of you are at times able to see us as we are. But so many do not. You are more than you know, Veena Holiday.”

“What...what kind of angel---? What are you doing here?”

“I am an angel of transition. I am a ferryman.”

Doctor Holliday was silent.

Her mouth fell open slightly. “...no...”

“I am Death.”

“YOU STAY AWAY FROM HER!” Holliday had a letter opener from her desk in her hand. It pointed at the angel.

“I am not here for your mother. I am here to stop a plague. I am here to stop my brother Xolotiel.”

“What do you want with me? And what the Hell's a Xolotiel?” Veena still had the letter opener stretched out in vain.

Charon retrieved the name tag he had taken from the dilapidated clinic. The department name matched the description over Holliday's office.

The doctor looked at the ID. “What the---? Where did you get this?”

“Xolotiel is a fallen angel, what you would call a demon. I retrieved this from a man who had lost his soul and his mind. He was part of the plague of which I spoke. Did you know him?”

“Yes...Andrew Fife. He worked in our department. He was working on a project we've all been on. The one for reviving parts of the brain after trauma and illness. Fife was a good man until his wife died about a year ago. Then we lost him. He said he heard whispers and voices. Then he withdrew and disappeared. All we found left were books on superstition and the Dev---“ Veena looked and realized she was talking about demons to an angel.

“Well, guess not so much myth now, huh?” Charon was silent.

“It was too bad. Fife was a good guy. A real salt of the Earth kind of guy.”

The angel of death opened his mouth to confirm her last statement. Then he shut his lips.

“I will be in touch, Dr. Holliday.” Veena went to speak but a sudden hush of wind and a flickering of her office lighting obscured her vision. When she opened her eyes, the angel was gone. Several dark feathers fell gently, rocking on the fading gale turned wind turned breeze.

Veena found herself holding herself. Her office was suddenly colder than it had ever been.

Doctor Holliday's day began. She made rounds. Normal sweeps through the hospital were not her area of expertise but she still walked the floors, helping where she could. Veena could not shake the feeling that she was not alone. It had been a day since her encounter with haunting divinity and the young woman questioned her sanity silently.

She checked patients. There was a car accident victim brought into the emergency room with barely registering vitals. Later that day, Veena stopped to visit with a colleague in Oncology and a young child valiantly fought in terminal stages. Holliday looked at the sick little body through hospital glass.

Holliday looked around.

"Damn you, Charon. Is this your work?"

The doctor moved from the child's window.

The angel of death was behind where she had just stood.

He looked into the child's room and saw one of his kind – the dark haired woman in robes returned her celestial brother's gaze. Charon nodded and bowed and she returned the salutation.

The angel was there for the child same as Charon had been for countless others. This was the Order. This was the Balance.

A day at the hospital was tiring enough. With the energy spent of looking over her shoulder all day, Holliday was even more so worn down. Home had sounded like Heaven on Earth. This was the first time since her mother fell ill that home had offered rejuvenation.

The door closed behind her. Veena threw her keys on the table in the kitchen. Bright orange envelopes were placed neatly in the middle. Jillian was the best, she not only took care of Madhu Holliday but she also got the mail. Veena promised to herself to send Halloween cards to her niece in California. She would even try to call her brother and update him on their mother's progress or lack of it.

"Hi mom, I'm home..." she said.

There was only silence. Holliday did not expect anything else.

Except this evening, her words were met with a whisper, a groan. Her words were met with a low, hoarse response. Vee's eyes widened.

It burst from the pantry. Dead was the only way to describe it. Once maybe it was someone's father or someone's son. Instead it was now a dead thing. Arms outstretched and reaching. Mouth snapping open and ending the hoarse moan coming from deep within.

Veena backed up after her yell. She spun at the sound behind her, another dead thing was walking through her kitchen, knocking a table and chairs aside.

Another corpse shambled from the closet. Holliday threw a look to her mother's bedroom. She was quiet and still beeping as normal.

Soon the woman's home was full of the walking dead.

"Doctor Holliday...you should join us..." The words did not come from the rotted mouths of the shambling cadavers. Amidst their decayed ranks were several people; living, breathing humans. They would have been no different because they wore similar scrubs like hers. The logos on the sleeves all were of St. Anthony's staff.

The one difference they had was the lack of eyeballs. Gored out holes stared at the surrounded young physician.

“Your research is the key, Holliday...no one should have to die again.” A Y-incision cut zombie reached for the doctor from behind.

A red dot appeared on the skull of the first resurrected. Veena’s window punched in a tight hole and the shot burst the head of the zombie into mist.

Another shot dropped the woman.

When the closet poured open with a flood of undead, the windows of Veena’s apartment broke in a rain of glass. Automatic gunfire tore her home into debris. Her home tore apart. Furniture erupted into the cheap wood and glue that made it. Windows and mirror shattered into a rain of sparkling triangles and miniscule debris. Everything from pillows to appliances was devastated in the high-pitched whine of bullets showering her home. Veena covered her head and through the tossed about hair in her face, Holliday saw the angel of death step into her house and rain bullets into her attackers.

She did not know weapons but he was using some machine gun with almost artistic grace, like a painter and brush. The G36C spat out muzzle flashes and a golden stairwell of discharging shells.

The swarm that pushed through the rapid fire assault dove and sent Charon’s weapon out of his hands. He fell back a bit and lifted several undead off their feet and sent them across Vee’s living room.

The angel’s eyes were closed. His lips pulled back and tight. It appeared as if something in this very room was assaulting him far more than any undead. Charon inhaled and stood, swinging his sickle in one move.

“YOU’LL NOT STOP US, ANGEL!” A living person leapt onto Charon’s back, she sunk a dark silver ornate blade into his side. The death angel reared out in pain and threw the woman from his form.

Vee looked on with wide eyes. “What the Hell? Vicki?”

The woman rolled over and looked at Holliday. “I serve a greater cause, Veena. No one will ever die again because of this tyrant!”

Vicki jumped up with eyeless sockets. As she spun around, Charon stood before her and tapped her on her forehead.

The woman grabbed at her throat. Her skin burst suddenly in sheets of boils. As they erupted in showers of pus and infection, the woman fell dead on Holliday’s floor.

“Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God...” Charon placed a hand out, just before touching the human doctor.

“Calm yourself, Veena Holliday.” Charon closed his eyes and waved a hand. Suddenly, Holliday’s home was returned to its former splendor.

“How---“ Before the angel could answer the doctor, he stumbled somewhat. He put a hand out. “I—I am weakened. I will be fine.”

Holliday kept her distance. “How did you know---what are you doing here?”

“I have been following you.”

Charon rolled over one of the humans that had fallen by his hand. He winced slightly.

“You’re hurt!” said Holliday.

“Yes...” The death angel touched his side. His hand had a wet dark golden liquid dripping from his fingers. “I will repair soon.”

“How can Death be hurt?”

“There are weapons, specially forged by our rebellious siblings. Even in the hands of humans they can harm us. Some weapons could actually crack these shells and leave us incapacitated or worse.”

Charon leapt down and for a moment, his coat blew up around him as might wings. He landed crouched down around the punctured skull of one of the dead attackers. He drove his fingers down into the skull and cracked it open.

The fluid that came out was greenish. It sparked inside its thick ichor. It crackled and broke with a charge inside the curves of traumatized brain and severed nerve. "It is the same compound I have seen before."

"NO---"

"What is it, Doctor Holliday?"

"This...this...I know this serum."

The angel stood silent.

"I made it," Veena answered. The death angel stood and watched her closely. "When mom...when mom got sick, the stroke damaged a lot of her brain." As Holliday walked down memories, her body walked to her mother's bed. The angel watching her with predatory gaze similar to any winged animal that shared the skies with his kind.

"It was my idea but with Seth and Dr. Jacobs, we made it a reality."

"You are not injecting this into corpses. You are not threatening the balance."

"You trust me?"

"No but it would make no sense to send your own abominations to kill you."

Veena paused with nothing in return.

"Wait," she began, "You're the angel of death, why would you want to stop zombies? I would think you would welcome them or something."

Charon snapped a dark gaze on to the doctor. "I am a Loyal, Veena Holliday. Our Father says go, I go. He says kill, I kill. I do not murder, slaughter or massacre. These undead are not agents of my work. If anything, they threaten the very fabric of a life you and your fellow mortals mistakenly believe to be unshakeable."

Holliday stepped back a bit. "---sorry---"

The death angel looked into the bedroom where Madhu Holliday lie quietly. Her machines were the only noise after the silence of Charon's battle. His dark eyes peered into the brain-dead human.

"Don't you look at her!" Veena was now between Death and her mother.

He looked at the woman in the bed yet spoke to her daughter. "I am not here for her."

There was silence between them – she a woman who fought for life, he a creature that took it. Again only the hiss and beep of life-support filled the air.

"Is that how it works?" the doctor began. Somewhere in the room, the physician was gone and a scared daughter took her place. "You know when you're here for someone?"

"We are told."

Holliday put a hand to Charon's chest. She walked forward, pushing the angel from her mother's doorway. "Okay, back to business. Vicki and Fife, they work for, God, they work for Jacobs. I don't know why but I can't see him doing anything to harm anyone. I have to find out what's going on."

"No, you will not. I will go to the morgue where Xolotiel will mostly likely strike again. You will remain here."

The pale rider walked by the doctor. She made a mocking face as he passed her. Again, the flapping of mammoth wings, a cold wind kicked up in her home and she found herself alone again.

The metal doors swung shut. The nightwatchman looked up and there was no one at the door or in the hallway before him. He returned to the newspaper in his hand.

The air chilled around him. The security guard snapped up his gaze and a tall man in a black leather jacket and dark jeans stood before him. His t-shirt read “BLUE OYSTER CULT WAS RIGHT.” Charon looked down at him with narrowed eyes. He began walking past the watchman.

The officer rising to his feet, put one hand out and another on his gun. “Excuse me, do you have a pass to---“

Charon raised his head and the guard fell into a slumber. The death angel lowered the man back into his chair with his hand.

The angel moved into the room. Its metal squares surrounded him. The morgue was silent. Not a creak of table. Not an echo of Charon’s footstep into the sick green palour of the place.

He felt it. His eyes closed and his body shuddered.

“Perdition...” he whispered and drew in an unnecessary breath. Spinning onto his feet, the angel’s hands were filled with blades as he caught the exploded morgue drawers and their occupants in mid-air. All at once, the room burst from its sides with the dead.

Charon spun, blades sliced open skulls and spilled brains and gushes of the green serum that moved corpses and hindered souls.

Doctor Holliday’s teeth were grit. Her hands balled into fists. She remembered talking with Charon before they left her place. The angel would head to the morgue to find the source of these resurrections. She had agreed to stay behind but knew she had to face her mentor, her friend.

Veena opened up Jacobs office.

She came face-to-face with the back of Jim Jacobs’ chair. Holliday could see his massive silhouette in the partial darkness.

“Damn it, Jim, say it isn’t true??? Say you didn’t have anything to do with my work and Fife?!?!”

There was no answer. She approached with short but slow steps.

“Jim?”

One hand on the edge of his chair and Veena spun it around. Her mentor was gripping the letter opener sticking out of his side. His white coat was soaking in red.

“My God! What---?”

“Sorry Vee, I really am.”

Holliday turned and saw Pearlman standing in the corner, wiping blood off his hands.

“Seth???”

“Yeah, I’m sorry Veena but once Andrew and I found them. Found the power they offered. We had to take them up on the chance to be more than doctors, more than human.”

Holliday was speechless.

“Now that you have a new friend, let’s go meet him. All three of us.”

She shot a look at the bleeding doctor in the chair.

“Oh no,” Seth interjected, “Not Jim. You see, I was true to my word, Veena. I did walk her out of your place. Well, I wheeled her out more like it.”

“---mom---“

The pale rider stood in the middle of the morgue. The streaks of blood and liquifying corpses at his feet painted Charon in a scene of slaughter.

“I know you are here, Xolotiel. I know your plot.”

“You know nothing, Loyal.” Charon spun and caught a sweeping blade with the curved blade of his own sickle. The clash sent out more than sparks but waves of force that twisted in coils of light and darkness, each rolling out and battling within.

The devil pushed back and swept the ground for the angel’s feet. Charon leapt over the attack, delivering a front kick which caught Xolotiel in the face.

For a moment, the demon’s true form showed with all bat wings and a crown of bloody thorns. He somersaulted and landed, pounding Charon’s ears with a double-slap. Charon staggered back and came forward again. The duo began an exchange of blows and blocks. Each impact tore the morgue apart.

Each strike sent out waves which moved past the metal squares and gutted the walls. Xolotiel was now something dark, horned and clawed. His strikes were massive slashes of talons forged in Hell’s battles. Some caught Charon and some blows were deflected. The death angel was mostly his ersatz form but at times, he was something robed and dark – a bone grin shining in an inkwell hood. His dual sickles swung and sliced. The devil was able to evade some of their edged attacks while some cut through demonic form.

Again, every impact was devastating to their surroundings.

People outside the hallways ran from the explosions. Some feared a gas leak or building’s collapse. Others worried about a terrorist attack.

Vee opened the door, Pearlman was behind her. Her mother propped up in a wheelchair sat comatose and beeping and living through machines. Holliday saw her angel.

“CHARON!”

The angel of death did not lose his concentration. He grabbed Xolotiel by his jacket collar and drove his head hard into the devil’s head.

The blow sent them both onto their backs.

Veena leapt over her mother and the shockwave sent the wheelchair careening into a nearby wall. Pearlman was knocked off his feet. He landed next to a blade one of his fellow acolytes had wielded unsuccessfully ago.

“When we waged war, you loyals were so easy to cut down.” began the former angel. He nodded to the staggering Pearlman behind the stirring Charon. In his hands, Seth held a dagger carved for celestial murder. Xolotiel locked eyes with his sibling.

”You’ve...you’ve learned a thing or two, about battle...”

The doctor charged with the blade ready to plunge. His approach was silent.

Charon stepped to the side and Pearlman drove his weapon into Xolotiel’s chest on mistake.

“I learned more than that, rebel. I learned how you like to win fights.” Charon stumbled back somewhat, his injuries accumulating. The devil Xolotiel fell to the ground. His crash shook the entire section of the hospital.

Seth looked in the dark crimson eyes of his demonic master. “Oh no---Xolotiel, I didn’t mean---“ Suddenly a hand was on the doctor’s forehead. The angel of death, clutching his side with one hand and touching the soul-sold human with the other, stood off to Seth’s side.

Charon said nothing. His eyes narrowed. Pearlman went to speak but his mouth opened and a buzzing came forth. “No Seth,; the angel said, “No.” And the doctor erupted from his offices in a swarm

of locusts. He gurgled and choked, twitching while the same plague that weakened a pharaoh now skittered, crawled and flew from his body.

Dr. Pearlman fell to the ground – a sunken husk with folds of flesh and clothing enshrouding the bag that he once was. As he fell, a syringe full of the ichor that he had twisted and polluted into a death-defying solution spun out of his pockets. Spun until it landed at Dr. Holliday's feet.

Veena watched in horror and then shook herself from the stare. She made her way across the carnage at her feet. Madhu Holliday sat in a wheelchair with closed eyes and a mouth agape. The young doctor began to check vitals.

“You're okay, mom, you're okay...” She repeated the mantra over and over while working.

Charon staggered his way over to the flattened Xolotiel. The blade stuck out of the devil's chest. Dark crimson sparked and poured from the wounds in the demon. A distanced sound of roaring and laughter seem to come from his injuries. Hell was waiting.

The Pale Rider stood as straight as he could. He stretched out a hand over the broken body of his sibling. Xolotiel spat out blood and spoke through cracked lips. “Remember brother...some of us fell...do not be pushed.”

Charon ignored the final words and began the casting out.

“Your physical form is battered. My will dominates your own. Fallen Angel Xolotiel, by the decree of He, the Arches, Virtues, Principalities and Dominations, I banish you.”

The demon roared out in pure anger and rage. His form cracked like a mirror shell surrounding a dark light. It writhed and twisted. Purple lightning leapt from thin air and encircled the Fallen Angel. The ground swarmed in a whirlpool of mist and brimstone. An unholy choir called out from beneath the floor, beneath the cement foundation and bedrock earth. Fire leapt up and then it was over. Xolotiel was gone.

Charon looked upward in the new silence.

Veena leaned over her mother. The stress of moving was taking its toll. Madhu Holliday's equipment began beeping with sounds of warning. Lights began to blink that were red and alarming.

Charon looked around at the destruction. People had died in the conflagration. People had been injured and maimed. A place that was once a source of healing was now creaking on weakened foundation and leaning in impending collapse.

The death angel closed his eyes and spoke to himself. Veena Holliday looked up and saw the angel spread his arms. Dark wings sprang from his back.

“God, Charon, the whole hospital is going to come down---!”

“Veena Holliday,” he spoke, his voice was doubled and the air chilled. “Close your eyes.”

The damaged hospital was renewed. Those who had died in the celestial war in Chicago were now restored. Doctor Holliday saw ever her mentor, Jacobs, had disappeared. Broken walls were rebuilt. Shattered windows and glass were returned. Fires were extinguished and flames had never burned. Charon was an angel and had all the powers of creation that such a title bore.

He smiled slightly with dark eyes at the doctor. Then he collapsed. His body was cracked from the battles, the stress of casting out one of the Morningstar's warriors and the will needed to restore the collateral damage. The death angel lie in the corner of the room.

Madhu Holliday's machinery began a series of warning pitches.

Her daughter threw watery eyes in the angel's direction.

Charon exhaled deeply. "It is her time, Veena."

"NO!!!" Vee held up the last syringe. Pearlman was gone but his legacy was now in her hands. Its contents were sickeningly green and swirling, swooshing against the glass.

Doctor Holliday looked at the dagger on the ground. Before she knew it, the angel-killing blade was in her hands. Charon was defenseless and talking of her mother's death.

"..kill him...your mother cannot die if Death is dead first..."

"...save her..."

Vee held her head.

"They are whispering, Holliday. As they whispered to Fife, as they whispered to the others. That is what the lost and the forgotten do. That is what the losing and the slipping fall into." He spoke and gold metal blood spat onto his lips.

Vee turned towards her mother. She was dying.

"I--I could save her!"

"No...you would make her an abomination. She would be a horror, not your mother."

"But I--I can't lose her---She's led so much life...has so much left..." She let the dagger fall to the ground at the same time she dropped the syringe. "She needs more time...more life...I'm tried to give her that. I'm trying to save her. I'm--I'm trying to..." The knife embedded itself in the ground. The needle shattered alongside it.

Charon now stood. He placed his hand on Veena's.

"You're trying to balance your mother's life out. I understand now."

"I can't lose her...please..."

"You will not. And I understand a little better why you all cling so hard. Allow me to give your mother...and you...peace. "

The death angel closed his eyes and spread his arms wide. With the extending of his hands, so did a burst of dark wings. They unfurled and a loud whoosh filled the room. Doctor Holliday was knocked to the ground. The pale rider's jacket and mortal clothing were gone and bright robes had taken their place. Charon shined, he glowed and a rain of light sparked and arced about him.

Vee was brought from her knees as Charon brought her up.

Before her, the bridge of light pulsed. The sounds of song sent glory over the young doctor. Her eyes ran with tears. Charon turned Holliday from looking at her and guided her gaze to her mother.

Gone was the frail and broken woman Veena had fought to keep alive every day since her stroke. Madhu Holliday's spirit lifted from her body. It maintained the woman's form for a moment.

"MOM---!!!"

A mother smiled at her daughter.

"---mom---"

"Mom, I love you---don't go" "Honey, I'll always be with you" "I tried to save you" "Veena, you did" "I don't know what to do" "I love you, my daughter" "Mom. I need you" "I'll always be with you."

The words, the conversation, the exchange took place in-between heartbeats and between two hearts.

There were no words. There was only a look and it was a sight, it was the mother that Veena had known years ago rather than the shell she had kept alive.

"Is---" Vee began, "Is it like this...like this for everyone?"

Charon continued to hold her aloft.

"For some. For the good of heart. For the righteous of soul."

“Goodbye mother---“

“My beloved, there is no goodbye.” One more smile and another flash. Madhu’s soul soared up to the aperture of light.

The room returned to its former stature.

Vee stood over her mother’s body.

Charon watched in the distance.

“Vee, how are you?” Doctor Jacobs was healed and without any knowledge of the ordeal less than a day ago. His side bore no injury.

The young Doctor Holliday sat in his office. “I’m...I’m fine, sir. My dad passed awhile ago. I’ve got some uncles who are taking mom’s death hard.”

The paternal doctor exhaled. “I’m glad you’re taking some time.”

“Thank you sir.”

Jacobs’ eyes narrowed. His hand went through his graying hair. “It’s odd about Seth. He just left town and all of our research was deleted from the system. All of our notes – gone.”

“Any word from security?”

“No, they think maybe he was working with some other staffers. Maybe they stole the research to sell it to the black market.” The large man shrugged. “I’m sure they’ll get caught.”

Holliday nodded. “Yeah, I’m sure they’ll get theirs. Well, James, I’m going to get going. I want to thank you for everything.”

The two embraced and said their goodbyes.

Charon was across the emergency room. There was a large biker sitting with a make-shift bandage tied around his head. A red stain was showing through.

On the wounded man’s vest was a grim reaper figure. It had a bone face, red eyes and held a bloodied sickle in its hands. A clawed hand pointed from the vest.

Vee walked up to the angel of death, looking with a slight furrowed brow at his painted depiction.

“They never get it right,” he began, “First the ancient Greeks. Now? This.” He turned towards the doctor. “You know they had me with a boat? What would I do with a boat?”

Vee shook her head.

Charon’s dark eyes narrowed. “How are you fairing, Veena Holliday?”

“I’m...I’m fairing. Thank you for showing me...more. I spent more time trying to keep my mom from dying that I forgot her life.”

“You spent time trying to balance. I can understand that.”

“So, you stopped a zombie plague and bad publicity for the hospital. What’s next?”

“There are others, Veena. There are immortals who drink blood. There are disembodied souls threatening the balance. But there is us.”

Vee smiled and shrugged. “Great. Death takes a Holliday.”

THE END