

VENGEANCE IN VEGAS

PART TWO OF THE JOHN HARROD TRILOGY

FIRST CHAPTER

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VENGEANCE IN VEGAS

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CHAPTER 1

WHY DID GOD hate me? Was He pissed off at something I did in my life? Was I not religious enough? Was it because I never prayed or went to church on a regular basis? I asked myself those kinds of questions over the last seven years. After Dave and I had returned from our bike trip to France, where the powers of creation drafted me for their divine agenda, my life was no longer my own.

Human beings had no protection against the powers of a real angel, whether it was good or evil, so it didn't come as a surprise that I got help. The angels in Hali called it divine endorsement. Cool stuff, but the novelty wore off for me a couple years ago. Opening time windows any time I wanted became as easy as drinking a glass of water, essential but not exciting.

The time travel ability was purely utilitarian. There was no way they'd ever let me use it to have fun or even fall in love again. That was the hardest part since the angels served up Mary, my one-day fiancé, to a sniper back in World War One. I never forgave them for that, and those selfish bastards never apologized.

Going to different times also grew old, but I made the best of them. I loved being in the 1930s. On this occasion, while I sat behind

the wheel of a sparkling new black 1934 Duesenberg Phaeton with its cream leather interior, I listened to the gentle spring rain as it pelted the car's canvas roof with soft wet thuds. I looked through the windshield, mesmerized, as the water drops bounced off the sleek hood that stretched several elegant feet in front of me.

I looked over myself in my black suit, black raincoat, fedora, and felt utter disgust. My best friend, Dave, a transplant from the cattle fields of Dumas, Texas, sat quietly on the passenger side while he checked his forty-five caliber revolver, a souvenir from our trip to World War One. Then, with a sudden flick of his wrist, flipped the cylinder closed with a metallic clink. He adjusted his fedora, took a breath, and looked toward the theater.

I turned and faced the shuttered Noble Theater across the street from us. The Noble was an unfortunate casualty of the silent-era that tapped out thanks to talkies, and then robbed of second chances by the Great Depression. We got out of the car then leaped over puddles to the broad shelter of the Noble's dark marquee.

Faded newspapers covered the windows and masked the inside from curious outsiders. Dave grabbed the theater's tarnished brass door handle and pulled the door open.

We stood in the musty lobby in quiet reverence. I imagined this place in its heyday with crowds packed in every weekend night to see the latest Hollywood offered. We viewed what once was impressive architecture with intricate plaster moldings while the rain rattled outside. I loved these old theaters even after the glamor had worn off.

We stepped toward a graceful marble staircase with moldy, carpeted treads. Gold-leafed crown moldings and celestial paintings on the ceiling reflected the faint glimmers of streetlight that reached through the two-story façade's stained glass lobby windows.

We climbed the marble staircase up two flights to an office where a dim light cast a sepia-like glow through its frosted glass door. I've been in situations like this many times over the past several years, but this time I felt unusually confident. Dave kept a close hand on his gun as we cautiously approached the office door. Thanks to the leaky roof, our footsteps squished on the wet carpet and made a stealthy approach impossible. I pushed the door aside until it bumped against the wall. I peered into the room and found three men looking back at us.

Two Italian-looking, brutish bodyguards arose slowly from their chairs and clasped their hands in the rotted office. Wallpaper and paint peeled off the walls and the swampy stink of wet wood did nothing to lighten the mood of the place.

The leader, a fat cat whom a tipster told me went by the name of Scalia, lit a cigar while he sat behind the desk. He was older, plumpish, maybe fifty or sixty, bald, with a few strands of hair combed over. Whoever he was, confidence ran through his veins like fresh oil through a hot engine.

Dave stepped beside me, cracked open his black raincoat, and hooked it behind his holster like an Old West gunslinger. He exposed the forty-five caliber revolver strapped around his waist, prepared for any action those thugs wished to dish out.

I carefully stepped to the window. My gun, still buckled in its holster, stayed nonthreatening. I split the oak window slats with my fingers then peered outside. The sound of a raucous truck engine caught my ear then I watched as it splashed the Duesenberg. Between the inclement weather and dim lighting, I ruled out the possibility of another sniper attack.

The bodyguards went for their guns, but Dave drew his gun faster and covered them.

“Easy, boys,” I said in a soft, determined lilt. “Are you Scalia?”

The man behind the desk nodded then eyed me keenly. He reached for a match that rested in a dish beside an art deco antelope lamp beside a shallow, empty wooden paper bin.

“Ready?” Scalia asked in a husky voice.

“I ain’t here to sing you a love song,” I said.

“Sit down, wise ass.”

Under the shadow of my fedora, I scanned the room. I cautiously sat in front of Scalia’s oak desk, its shellac finish flaked off and veneer pulled away from the edges. Dave stood beside me with a clear shot at everyone.

“Enough with the delays,” Scalia said. “If you got the goods, then I got the green and a free pass through turnaround in case you do something stupid. Either way, you’re covered.”

Scalia set a briefcase packed with thousand-dollar bills onto the table.

“Turnaround can’t do anything for me,” I said.

“Maybe not, but I’m sure the money will. Let’s see it.” Scalia leaned forward on the table.

I hesitated at first but knew I had to show him eventually. I checked the bodyguards who remained as stiff as concrete pillars. I pulled up my coat sleeve and showed Scalia the marking. He squinted through a cloud of cigar smoke for a closer look. There it was, the seven-pointed star tattooed on my wrist. It was exactly like the one I first saw when I was in World War One.

“He’s the goods,” Scalia said.

The bodyguards whipped out their guns, but Dave shot them dead. Then, a blinding flash of light burst from Scalia’s chest. His appearance instantaneously morphed from human into that of the fallen angel Turel, my declared enemy, who then let out a horrific screech. Turel crouched into an attack stance while his leathery wings

stretched wide. He retracted his wings then revealed a long, glowing dagger.

I tackled him then gripped his throat, determined to end him fast. Turel's crimson eyes burned with rage as he rolled me across the floor to free himself. He then flung me off him, and I slammed against the wall. Dave approached for a closer shot when Turel swung his wing wide and beheaded Dave.

"Dave!" I shouted as his head tumbled to the floor and his body crumpled down against the wall.

The rippling waves of a time window suddenly appeared. Turel dashed into it then closed it. I looked at Dave's lifeless body with his gun still in his grip, and then a wave of anger washed over me. I tapped my divine endorsement abilities, opened my own time window, and raced after Turel. Residuals left from closing time windows yielded determinations about the time and place the window led to, and I got good at reading them.

I dashed out of the time window and dove onto Turel. We tumbled onto the sandy, dusty road of a rustic town in the Old West. I still wasn't sure how divine endorsement allowed me to change my clothes to match the era. Maybe I imagined the clothing and the ability took care of the rest. My clothes spontaneously changed from a 1930s gangster suit to 1870s Western wear. Town folk screamed and ran for safety while a mounted cowboy tried to regain control of his startled horse.

I wrangled my way around Turel and snapped one of his wings. He shrieked and flipped me over his shoulder. I rolled away and scrambled onto all fours. Turel charged at me with his dagger. I opened another time window then rolled into it. Turel dove in after me.

My clothes again changed into a bizarre 1970s style with bell-bottom pants with a matching polyester print shirt. I grabbed Turel, spun him around, and threw him into a bank of slot machines in a casino somewhere. Panicked casino patrons stampeded out of our way, shocked at the unusual fight that played out in front of them. Turel backhanded me, and then hit me with a roundhouse kick, which knocked me onto a craps table.

I felt a rage deep inside of me, an unstoppable kick his ass ten ways to Sunday rage. Turel charged me as I scampered off the table. Turel dove at me. I caught him then body-slammed him to the floor. I finally had him. I gripped his neck and was about to give it a quick twist when an attractive woman standing beside a roulette wheel caught the corner of my eye. She had a look of terror in her eyes as she slowly approached me.

“John, watch out,” Mary, the one-time love of my life, said. Turel then plunged his dagger into my chest.

Everyone in the casino stood still as mannequins, including Mary. I took a breath then looked at her as her likeness faded away.

“Thanks, Mary. Sometimes a guy can’t get screwed enough,” I said.

I looked at the dagger shoved in up to the handle then shook my head as the knife faded away. Next came the part of the training that I hated the most, the evaluation.

The casino setting dissolved away. The surroundings then returned to those of the training room in Hali, my home away from home. I sat there on the floor surrounded by the golden shimmer of angelic walls while three squat evaluator angels looked down at me from their high table shaking their heads.

“Hey, try it in my shoes, pal,” I said, disgusted with myself with yet another failed session under my belt. I hated the evaluators since they only spoke when I screwed up. They never encouraged me.

Ellis, an Archangel-class Protector angel, charged with preparing me for my duty to stop Turel from getting the last page of the *Book of Ancients*, approached from the other side of the room. Despite never seeing the outside of Hali, I grew accustomed to coming here, even though to me the familiar training room was nothing more than a huge, fancy room with a divine flair. Ellis told me in earlier sessions that Hali was an angelic world, not a planet nor a star, but an existence in Heaven where selected angels became Protectors.

Newly arrived candidates who survived training started out as Guardians. Over time, they’d climb the ranks to Watchers, Archangels, and finally Powers. I never set foot outside the training room, which sucked because I wanted to know what Heaven looked like outside the unfriendly confines of the Hali Training Center. Ellis said that maybe I could see it after I died. However, his offer didn’t seem sincere.

I’ve been coming to Hali for seven years. However, I quit counting the sessions after a hundred. By using time windows, Ellis used his divine endorsement power to pull me from Earth and train me for days on end. When the training session ended, he’d send me home at the same moment he took me. Sometimes it felt weird, as though I lived extra days. Recently, I showed problems with concentration as well as adversarial reading. As a result, I made one stumbling mistake after another.

Sometimes I thought Ellis enjoyed watching me fail. He was hard to figure out. Maybe he didn’t like his job much, but from my experience with angels, none of them seemed thrilled about my usual crushing defeats. How many angelical body bags would I end up in before they realized they got the wrong guy to do their dirty work?

“You made several mistakes,” Ellis said then crossed his arms. I stayed on the floor and sat cross-legged. The more I trained with angels, the less Hali impressed me.

“Yeah? What’d I do wrong this time?” I asked with attitude.

“You trusted Scalia too quickly,” Ellis said with a shot of frustration and a dash of temper.

“I didn’t see any reason to wait. Dave and I had everyone covered. Did I do anything right?”

“You’ve mastered the use of time windows. You can place yourself where you choose far better than any other Interceptor had before you. Your spontaneous clothing choice was perfect for all periods, so there was no wasted time in blending in.”

“That’s a plus.”

“Now, what if he killed you for real?”

I cupped my hands together then spread them apart as I made an explosion sound.

“Exactly,” Ellis said with conviction. “No turnaround for locals, not even for out-of-timers like you.”

“Don’t I get some kind of special consideration? You guys forced me into this crap, remember?”

“We know, but you’re also human. When you go to other time periods, you’ll be an out-of-time local yet still vulnerable to pain and death as any other human.”

“Who are locals?”

“They’re people within their own time period.”

“Why can’t people go through turnaround?”

“Turnaround was made for angels only. Archangels can put humans through turnaround with approval, but that has never happened. If an angel’s human form dies, the angel can return to

humanity but with severe memory problems. This serves as an important safety measure, a sort of time out, if you prefer.”

Ellis walked toward a holographic image of a podium-like pedestal that once supported the *Book of Ancients*. I got off the floor and stood beside him. Strange hieroglyphic-like symbols surrounded the pedestal rim. Then, I touched one, a seven-pointed star.

“I’ve been trying to kill Turel in this fantasy land for years but can’t seal the deal. If I can’t kill him here, how can I kill him for real?” I asked.

“Try not to focus so hard on killing him,” Ellis said. “Concentrate on getting the last page at the handoff. The page itself affords some protection while you possess it, so Turel won’t be able to kill you as easily if you didn’t have it. If you succeed in getting the last page, Turel will have no choice but to wait for you until the Redemption Moon.”

“How do I do that?” I asked.

“By properly dealing with distraction, like your friend Dave’s death for starters.”

“Throwing in Mary was a cheap shot, by the way,” I said.

I never won a fight in a training session. I tried all kinds of tactics, but they all ended with me dying in some unique fashion.

“You can’t let the closest people in your life, living or dead, distract you,” Ellis said then clasped his hands.

“Thank God this isn’t complicated,” I said.

“Ending the sarcasm as well as appreciating the gravity of your situation will help,” Ellis said in a loud, impatient voice.

Ellis’s brow squeezed tightly. He turned to the podium then bowed his head respectfully.

“Only one page remains,” Ellis said under his breath.

“What does the last page look like?” I asked.

“In an angel’s possession, the page is in a divine form no man can hold. It has to appear in physical form for them to pass it on to you. There have been other Interceptors, many more handoff attempts, but no success.”

Over time, I understood why the angels used me for their purpose. I only hoped they wouldn’t lose sight of that. Maybe there was a special reward after all this was over that showed some appreciation for my trouble and sacrifice. My life wasn’t mine anymore, and they owed me big time.

“I don’t like those odds,” I said. “So you guys chose me to be the last one to succeed? I hope you know what you’re doing because I sure as hell don’t.”

“You’re our last hope, John, but be forewarned. Evil likes to play,” Ellis said. “Somewhere along the way, they might send a woman into your life so be careful. Don’t be too trusting of anyone, not even your closest associates.”

“Thanks, I’ll try to remember that.”

“That’s enough for today. We’ll try again soon. Continue with your weight training to maintain your strength. Despite your life setbacks, we’re happy that you’ve progressed as well as you have even after Mary’s passing. It’s in everyone’s interest that you be as strong as possible, physically and mentally.”

“Yeah, all right,” I said with an exhausted sigh.

I opened a time window then left Hali for home, a trip that lasted all but a blip of time. The time window was paper-thin, so whatever distance I traveled between Hali, Chicago, or other times was undetectable to me.

The sun shined bright as the Cubs hosted another team ready to destroy them. I wasn't up for going back to my apartment, so I went to Sluggers for a couple of beers and to gather my thoughts.

While I watched the game on an overhead television mounted above the bar, Dave entered, sat on the stool next to me, and smiled.

"Did you have a bad day at school?" Dave asked.

"I can't nail this thing down," I said then gulped my beer. "Every time I'm ready to pop the bastard, I get screwed."

"It can't be that bad. They're doing this to prepare you, you know?"

"I've been training with them for over seven years. Hit me with the shit, already."

I took several swigs from my beer bottle then dragged over a cheap, faux wood bowl of pretzels.

"I know what you mean," Dave said. "On a side subject, did you find the Florida pictures? I want to show Rita."

"I found them. Man, I can't believe you're getting married."

Dave smiled as he patted my shoulder.

"You'll find someone," Dave said.

"Yeah," I said. "Maybe."

I paid the bartender, and then we left for my Wrigleyville apartment.

We walked past Wrigley Field, and as we came underneath the CTA elevated tracks, a passing train squealed to an eardrum-bursting stop.

"So what are you doing in training now?" Dave asked.

"Lots of time travel. I tell you, it ain't any vacation either. I always die. I've been shot, stabbed, meat-hooked, crushed, drowned, and otherwise done in by industrial tools you never knew existed. They even had a fake you. Turel cut your head off last time."

"Classic," Dave said as he chuckled.

“It’s so annoying. They always ask to see a seven-pointed star.”

“Do you have one?”

“There I do. Here I don’t.”

I removed my apartment key from my pocket then used my shoulder to push through the vestibule door of my apartment building.

“Can you at least tell if they’re good or bad angels?” Dave asked.

“They got good angels doing bad things and bad angels doing good things. They trip me up pretty good so I can’t tell who’s on my side,” I said.

“Sounds like a lop-sided playing field. It’s like they’re setting you up to fail.”

“No doubt the deck’s stacked against me.”

“So how are you going beat the house?”

“Cheat, I guess. I don’t know how, but there has to be a way to beat that house.”

We entered my apartment. The pungent smell of rotting food or a dead mouse made me cringe. I tossed my keys on the kitchen counter where they slid into a small stack of junk mail and a tall pile of *Chicago Tribune* newspapers.

Dave paused in the living room and stared at the mess. It didn’t matter to the angels if my apartment looked as though a sloppy hoarder lived here or that I didn’t think much of refuse disposal. All aspects of my life went down the crapper after Mary died anyway. I handled the occasional foul odor problem scientifically by opening a window. I looked down at the baseboard and saw a small rat, dead, stuck in a glue trap, the lucky little spud. I picked up the trap with the deceased then tossed it in the garbage can beside the refrigerator.

Dave grimaced as he pulled the red drawstrings of the white plastic bag and knotted it. I took over, pulled out the bag from the white plastic garbage can, and set it beside the front door.

“John, I’m not one to tell people how to spend their lives, but you can’t live like this, buddy,” Dave said.

I didn’t feel offended or insulted. I just didn’t see the point in keeping a clean house since the angels could pull me into action at any time.

“Maybe I’ll straighten things out later today,” I said.

I went to the coffee table to retrieve a small cardboard box. I loved Dave, and we had some great experiences. We spent a couple summers working in Florida on a lawn maintenance crew but only thought to take pictures on a couple of occasions. Thank goodness, I kept those pictures safe. It was the end of an era for us when he proposed to his girlfriend and moved out.

“Are you still seeing Margot?” Dave asked. “You haven’t mentioned her lately.”

“No, that didn’t end well,” I said. “I’ve been in a romance coma since Mary died. Maybe there’s no room for a woman in my life with this angel nightmare going on. I’ll never find anyone like her again anyway, so why bother looking?”

“You never know. Besides, time changes everything.”

I went to get a couple beers from the fridge when a time window suddenly opened and startled me. An Italian-looking guy with silver hair, gold necklaces, and wearing a dark blue running suit emerged. He angrily punched Dave who stumbled against the wall then fell to the floor. Before I knew it, the intruder slugged me then pushed me against the kitchen counter where I spun off it and crashed on the garbage bag.

An explosion of terrible pain seared through my eyes as the intruder pounced onto my back. The air rushed out of my lungs as his weight pinned me fast to the floor.

“What the hell’s going on?” I strained to say.

“We’ve been tracking your ass for years, pal, and now it’s time to pay up,” the intruder said, his hot breath inches from my ear. I didn’t recognize his voice, but the familiar clicking sound of a cocking gun hammer sent a racing chill down my spine.