

VENGEANCE SQUAD



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DEVIANT MAGIC BOOK FIVE: VENGEANCE SQUAD

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THE DEVIANT MAGIC STORY SO FAR...

A Date with Death introduced Council of Intelligence Driff, an elven agent dispatched to investigate Harksburg, Illinois, a small town where no one can die. Driff discovered that the local reaper, having spiraled down into a deep depression due to a recent breakup, had been shirking his deathly duties. When our hero's attempt to solve this problem with the aid of a group of local losers blew up in all their faces, Driff learned that the strange events in Harksburg were just part of the devious Witch's plot to temporarily dispatch an elven hero and rob him of the Ether, a powerful magic he could only lose upon dying.

That magic became important in *Shotgun*, when failed family man Roger Brooks discovered it in his silverware drawer and it bonded to his old ten gauge. The elves returned him to their capital, Evitankari, and declared him their Pintiri—a warrior and figurehead with a position in their legislative body, the Combined Council. Roger eventually teamed up with Driff and the reunited Brooks family to fend off the Witch and put an end to the newly restored demon warlord Axzar long thought dead. The story you're about to enjoy begins mere hours after that final battle.

Diary of a Fairy Princess occurs parallel to *Shotgun*, revisiting certain events from a different point of view. Notably, it implies that the Witch may not be quite as malicious as she has seemed.

In *Stranger than Fiction*, Samantha Brooks—the Pintiri’s daughter and Chief of Staff—unravels a plot against Evitankari by a secret society of shady immortals and discovers the truth behind the exploits of a group of former teen heroes. Remember that demon warlord from *Shotgun*? Roger learned that Axzar’s spirit is now possessing his son, Ricky. To protect the boy while he finds a way to solve that problem, Roger dispatched a horde of shapeshifters who have assumed Ricky’s form to all corners of the globe, hoping to confound any evildoers who want to claim the boy’s dark cargo for themselves.

Which brings me to the matter at hand: *Vengeance Squad*. We’re going back to Harksburg to check in on Ren Roberts and those pesky Tallisker towers that keep blowing up. Let’s just say that’s about to get personal for poor Ren.

— CHAPTER ONE —

Ren Roberts couldn't tear his eyes away from the television screen. He and his mother had watched the grainy cell phone video of Tallisker's Detroit headquarters exploding five, six, maybe seven times. *The curse of twenty-four-hour network news*, he thought morbidly. The outcome never changed, no matter how hard he willed it. One moment that stretch of midwestern skyline stood empty and blue; the next, one of Tallisker's infamous hidden towers exploded in a tremendous fireball that turned the surrounding block into a crater and sent debris raining down upon the city.

Ren wondered if his father had become a single piece of that debris or if he'd been blasted into several. The latter seemed more likely, but he supposed it didn't matter. Any recognizable parts would be scooped up and disposed of by Tallisker's fixers. Ed Roberts had always joked that there'd be nothing in his casket.

Ellen Roberts sat on the coffee table in front of Ren, beside his untouched afternoon scotch. She held her phone so tightly to her ear that Ren worried it might become permanently attached.

"Pick up, Eddie," she muttered every time she dialed. "Please pick up."

On screen, the billowing pillar of smoke was replaced with a shot of Twenty-four Hour Cable News Barbie sitting behind a curved desk in a slick studio trimmed with important looking computer generated bullshit. “Just who is this Tallisker Corporation?” she asked with perfect vaguely midwestern diction, her dark eyes wide with concern. “How does a multinational operation hide a skyscraper in plain sight?”

Well, you see, Ren’s mental voice said with a heavy dose of parental knowhow, when elves and demons decide they hate humanity very, very much, they put their heads together and use their magic to conceal all the important shit.

“Why hasn’t this story been squelched?” he mused to his highball, because he knew his mother wasn’t listening. “Tallisker has armies of publicists, lawyers, and thugs whose only job is keeping the company’s name out of the news.”

Ellen pried her phone from her ear, punched a button on the touchscreen, and then reattached the device to her skull. “Pick up, Ed. Please.”

Ren’s mother had been on her way to her book club when the news hit. She was still dressed like a Patagonia model: designer jeans, brown puffer vest over a flannel shirt, her blonde hair up in a ponytail, just enough makeup to look good in a selfie with some friendly wildlife. Though he hadn’t seen her face since they’d sat down, he knew her lip would be curled and her eyes bloodshot. The fingers of her free hand flicked back and forth across her wedding ring.

The wild corporate swinger parties just won’t be the same, Ren thought evilly. A pang of something shot through his gut. Guilt? No, that couldn’t have been it. Hunger, he decided. Or maybe just gas.

“Tallisker’s complex web of holdings is nearly impossible to decipher,” explained a middle-aged hipster in an off-putting corduroy jacket, live on location from what appeared to be his dining room. In the panel beside him, the anchor pursed her lips

and shook her head. “Are they a financial services corporation? A secretive defense contractor? An experimental biomedical laboratory? Dangerous arms dealers? My research suggests they’re all of the above, and more. The truth’s somewhere down a dark rabbit hole I can’t find the bottom of.”

“Eddie,” Ellen cooed, trying to spin her ring right through her finger. “Come on.”

Ren knew how this particular story ended. His father had been drilling it into his head for as long as he could remember. The families of Tallisker executives allowed the demonic bastards to desperately clutch to a few shreds of their waning humanity, providing a safe harbor in the storm of madness threatening to break their grips on reality. Ed, true to form, had genuinely loved his wife and son—but that love had made Ren and Ellen significant targets even in the best of times. Removing or converting a rival’s family was a great way to climb the corporate ladder or secure your position. A particularly vile piece of work named Demson had made it no secret that he wanted Ren as his protege, likely to slow or halt Ed’s rise toward the board, or to ensure that he’d play along once he got there. Ren didn’t want to turn into a beastly personification of evil. He’d always been content as a lay follower of the world’s lesser vices. And so he had stayed in Harksburg, within his father’s protective sphere, despite the opportunities offered by his family’s wealth.

“Edwarrrrrrrrrrrd. Please.”

The primary anchor appeared relieved to be alone on screen again. “Authorities are evacuating an area two square miles around the fallen skyscraper, lending credence to social media reports of chemical spills and clouds of strange gasses.”

Ed Roberts’s territory offered no security without the threat of the man himself enforcing it. That meant it was time for Ren to leave.

But where could he go? Life on the run or in hiding wouldn't inherently be any safer than staying put. A deceased Tallisker executive's family still held value as a grotesque display of power and influence, or even just as a means of satisfying an overactive ego. Demson or one of Ed's other rivals would find him eventually. Ren couldn't stand the thought of spending every waking hour looking over his shoulder for the pursuers he knew were just a step behind him.

"Pick up, pick up, pick up."

An interesting idea pierced the dark clouds hanging ominously in Ren's mind like a beam of morning sunshine. He considered it for a moment, and then took a hit of his forgotten scotch and considered it a moment more to make sure the idea held up. "This was an inside job, wasn't it?"

When she didn't respond, he leaned forward and spoke louder. "Ma. Conspiracy?"

His mother nodded, covering the mouthpiece as if worried someone on the other end might overhear. "Guaranteed. No one's dumb enough to take that kind of shot at Tallisker except Tallisker itself."

"My thoughts exactly," he replied with a tip of his glass and a triumphant swig.

It wasn't much to go on, but it was better than waiting around for the inevitable, and Ren possessed something he doubted the board's own investigators had: a sneaking suspicion that recent events in Harksburg, of which he'd been a key part, were somehow related to his father's summons to Detroit and that building's subsequent destruction.

Ren finished his drink. "I'm going out for a bit," he declared, rising slowly against a stiff pair of knees. "I need to have a chat with Death."